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Science Fiction

ISAAC ASIMOV
Updating the Asteroids

AUGUST 75c • UK 35p.

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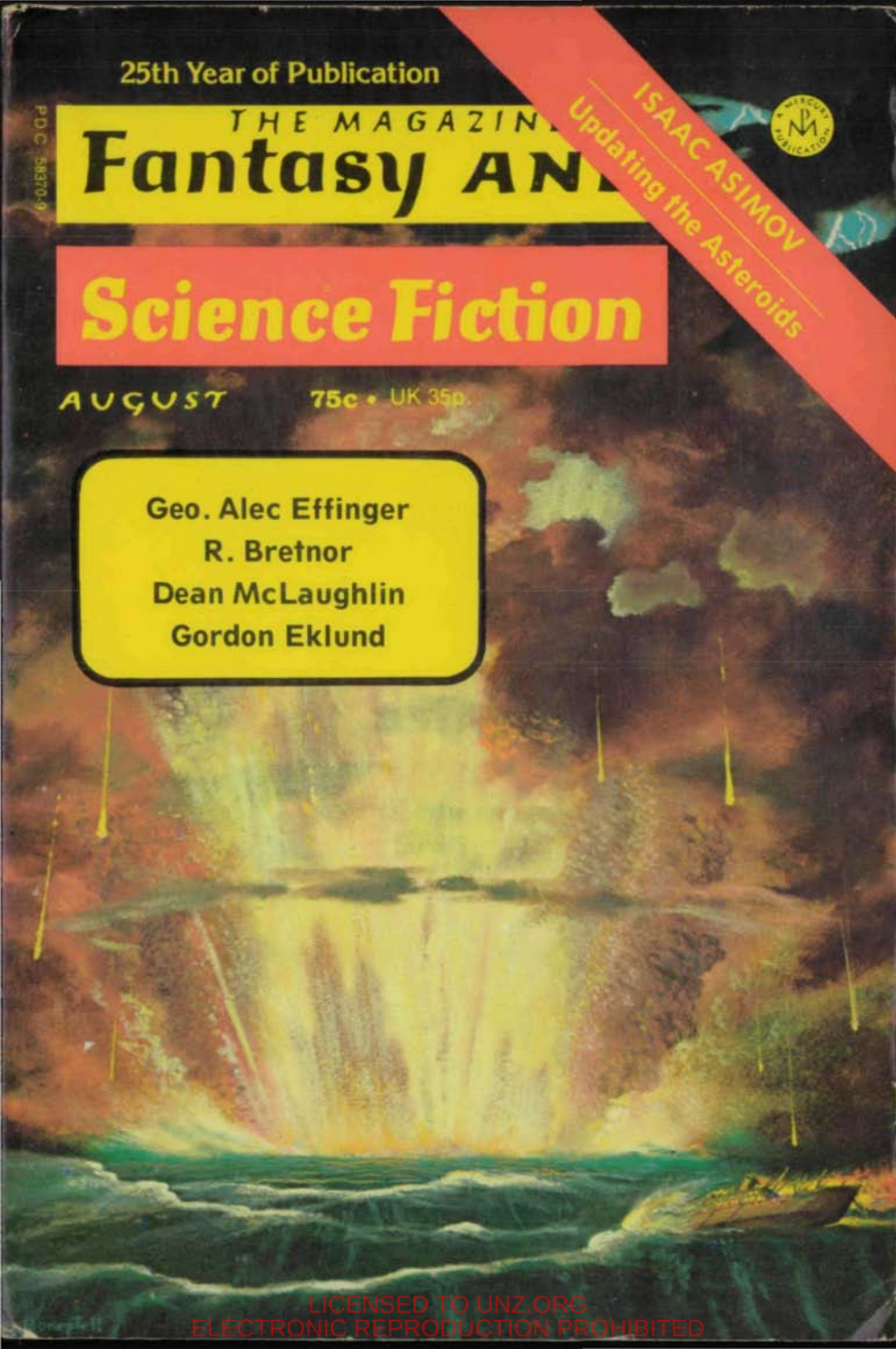

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction

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Gordon Eklund's work continues to get more impressive; this, we feel, is his best story yet. It concerns a complex relationship among an alien and two humans. It is also about different kinds of guilt and loneliness and love, and it is an intensely moving piece of writing.

The Treasure In The Treasure House

by GORDON EKLUND

I

A flash of heat strikes him down:

Tense and impatient from the ordeal of waiting, Timmons seemed incapable of preventing his gaze from returning time and again to the small rectangular glass peephole that opened at eye level into the bright room beyond. He stood facing the wall in a high dim corridor. Near his elbow a hand-printed sign read: *Canterbury Jones — An Adventure.* By *Arthur Jace.* A set of adjustable earphones, tangled wires disappearing into the wall through a socket, hung from a nail directly above the hole. Below, near his hands, a set of dials had been embedded in the hard wood. One of the dials blinked on and off, red: it said ON.

This meant that although Timmons could not hear the drama, he could see it; and, for him, that was sufficient.

And yet he also realized how silly it was. This was hardly the time when he needed to be standing here. He ought to be home like Etta — in bed, with her pile of old books. In spite of his feelings, however, Timmons could not avoid being moved by the drama that flowed in front of his eyes. How many times in the past thirty-six years — since the day his father had chosen him to be keeper — had he stood at this place watching this scene? Of course, there was no way of calculating. With a sigh, he forced himself to step back. Count the times? He might as well try to count the stars in a clear night's sky. Or the separate flakes of snow composing a Stafwoldian blizzard. Or the flowers in a field at the height of summer. Or —

Ah, no, no. Timmons made himself quit. His hands still shook; his cheeks were moist. He tried to laugh at his own foolishness but,

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unable to resist even now, returned his gaze to the peephole instead. Instantly, before he could see, he drew back, ashamed by his own weakness. It was too easy. Worse than any drug or religion, for unlike drugs and religions, the peephole was not merely a means of fleeing reality but a method by which a man both escaped and transcended common reality. He plunged forward, not away; he reached above into a higher reality existing beyond this one. That was *Canterbury Jones;* it was — such a simple phrase — a work of art. And, to Timmons, that work represented a greater and more definite essence than any comparable creation in the universe. The story of *Canterbury Jones,* for instance — the barest bones of its plot — those insignificant details moved him far more deeply than the most terrible crises in his own life. Invariably, viewing *Canterbury,* he wept at what he saw — or laughed, shouted, howled. For his own life, he had barely a peep to spare. And there was a difference — a reason. *Canterbury Jones* was a work of art; Timmons's life was not.

And he was the keeper. The drama belonged to him in a way that it belonged to no man — except its actual creator. Timmons felt it was his duty to watch — and be moved.

The others could not understand this. But when Jace came — yes, Timmons thought — of all men, Jace would know.

But Jace wasn't here now — no, not yet.

Impatiently, Timmons returned his eyes to the peephole. He knew the entire drama by heart — which was why he did not use the earphones — and, upon demand, could very well recite any given section. And not merely the dialogue, but the very movement, the expressions and inflections, the individual twitches of the various characters. Hundreds of times he had seen the drama unfolded in its entirety — nine full days of uninterrupted viewing — so that now, when he came and saw only a brief sequence, that was enough; the fragment brought to his consciousness the whole of the great drama. Etta could do this too, but no one else. Did they care? Could they, in fact, bear the burden necessary for success? Watching — experiencing the drama — Timmons simply departed the world. He entered another — Canterbury's world — Arthur Jace's.

But again he drew away. His timepiece said it was due — it was past due. He turned in the corridor and stared at the phone in the opposite wall. *Ring, ring, ring,* he thought. *Call and tell me that he's*

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here. But the instrument — as sullen as a frown — remained silent. The ship had crashed. Was that it? Jace dead, never to return. Stafwold deprived of the fruits of a promise made five centuries past. The second drama — the greater and greater work — destined to stand beside *Canterbury Jones.*

When Timmons thought of that — of the new treasure soon to be his to keep — he could not control his impatience. He wanted Jace, could not bear to live without him. "Ring!" he shouted at the phone. "Call and say that he's come!"

Suddenly, it was not only his hands that were shaking. The entire corridor quivered. A flash of heat struck him down. The floor leaped up. Cracking an elbow as he fell, Timmons howled in pain. A high shrill whistling noise whined in his ears.

On the floor Timmons laughed. The ship! Of course! Yes, yes! The ship!

Jace!

Abruptly, on the wall above, the phone rang. Timmons stopped laughing and glared. Now? Why call now? What were they trying to prove? Jace was here. Timmons knew. Hadn't he heard the ship?

Letting the phone ring, he stumbled to his feet. Once his balance was secured, he turned and raced down the long straight corridors. He was running home. As he ran, he cried out, shrieking joyfully, like a small boy the morning of his birthday.

"Etta, Etta! He's here! Jace is here!"

II

The bitterly cold terminal shack:

It was bitterly cold here inside the old terminal shack, though not so cold compared to the weather outside. Timmons stood away from the bulk of the others, resting lightly upon his heels. The old shack was dimly lighted and poorly ventilated — a pair of small gas lanterns. A thick crust of dust covered the floor and cobwebs were stuck to every corner. How long had it been since so many men had gathered in here? Years and years, Timmons knew. Could it be five hundred? Since the last time Jace had come — or left?

Timmons was making a deliberate effort to concentrate upon such exterior details, fearing that — otherwise — he would simply be staring at Jace and making an utter fool of himself. No. Not a fool. Not him. For if that was so, then what were the others? What about Crankin and Wiley and Best, their dozen assistants, their secretaries, wives, sons, mistresses, flunkies? Here they all were, clustered around Jace, pumping his hand, repeating endlessly just how privileged they knew they were.

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Welcome to Stafwold, Mr Jace. Such a pleasure to have you here. An honor for us, a privilege.

Of course it was. A privilege because — as Timmons knew — none of them — and surely not Crankin or Wiley or Best — knew this man. How often did they come to view the great drama? Once a year at the most — on anniversary occasions. And how long did they stay — eyes vaguely fixed to the peepholes? An hour? Two? No, never that long. And yet here they were with Jace himself, touching hands, daring to speak. They were privileged creatures — yes.

Crankin and Wiley and Best — the self-ordained rulers of Stafwold. Between them, Arthur Jace stood like an angel fallen from heaven.

"But here," Crankin was saying, leading Jace by an elbow through the thick debris, "is my older brother. This is Timmons. He's keeper of our museum. That's where we have your story."

"No, drama," Timmons corrected.

"Yes. Exactly." Crankin, a middle-aged man with a creased face, smiled back at his followers. "My brother here thinks you stand next to God Himself, Mr. Jace."

"That would be a privilege." Jack stuck out a hand. "You do me a great honor, Timmons."

"I feel you deserve it." Timmons accepted the proffered hand and shook it. The fingers were cold and brittle. No wonder. It had to be way under zero in here. "I'm privileged to meet you, Mr. Jace."

"No — Arthur."

"But I can't —"

"For God's sake," Crankin interrupted, glaring angrily at his brother. "Call him whatever he wants."

"It is my name," Jace said.

"Of course." The thing that bothered Timmons most about Arthur Jace was the man's incredible youth. Naturally, he had known to expect it; but even knowing why, fully understanding the mechanics of the situation, he still could not feel right meeting a man whose name was legend, a denizen from the dim historical past, and finding him looking far younger than his own self. Barely a whisper of gray in Jace's sandy hair. Eyes blue and bright. Brown freckles on his cheeks. Smooth, shaven, unwrinkled skin. Thirty years — not thirty centuries. But the latter figure was closer to being correct.

"And this must be —" Jace nodded to the figure at Timmon's side "— your daughter."

"No." Timmons flushed. "My wife, actually — Etta."

"Oh, really?" Jace laughed unself-consciously. "At least I was half right. She is yours." He bowed

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again. "I am pleased to meet you, Etta."

She nodded in reply.

"But you're not —" he was staring carefully at her "— fully human, are you? Your eyes almost seem to be —"

Crankin interrupted: "A half-breed. The race that originally occupied Stafwold. Etta is our final remnant."

"Oh, really? What a shame. No others at all?"

"Disease," Crankin said. "Ours, I'm afraid. We couldn't—"

"My father wiped them out," Timmons said.

"Oh, hell." Crankin glared. "You're not going to —"

"My brother," Timmons said, indicating Crankin, "prefers to believe that genocide is a natural phenomenon, like falling snow. When my father inherited the command of this colony, there were several hundred Stafwoldian natives still —"

"He set them free," Crankin said.

"So that he could murder them."

Crankin turned to Jace, speaking softly, as if the conversation was a private matter. "When my father became commander here, slavery was still being practiced. He abolished it and set the natives free."

"And then," Timmons said, "when they attempted to return to their old lands, he came down and slaughtered them to the last —"

"They had killed several of our people," Crankin explained. "They seemed to think —" he laughed "—because they were free it meant they could reclaim the land. We had farms out there — crops and livestock. So they killed —"

"And they were right. It was their land."

"Oh, for God's sake," Crankin said. "He married one of them, didn't he?"

"The last one. He saved her as a curiosity. He was doing his penance. He seemed to think, because he married her, it atoned for —"

"And now, because of him, there's still one." Crankin nodded at Etta.

"Half a one, you mean," said Timmons.

Crankin took a deep breath, then suddenly swallowed. He spoke in an even tone: "But I don't think Mr. Jace is interested in hearing all this ancient history."

"No, go ahead." Jace, only dimly aware of the conversation, continued to gaze at Etta. "Aliens have always intrigued me. When I left on my voyage, you see, none had been discovered. I've met only a few."

"And you won't see any others here," Timmons said.

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"I thought we agreed to drop that subject," Crankin said, softly.

"But I do like your world," Jace said, speaking directly to Etta. "But tell me. Is it always this cold? Outside, I swear, I nearly froze stiff."

"In the summer it gets blistering hot," Crankin said, edging around to insinuate himself between Jace and Etta. He bent his wrist. "Eccentric axial tilt. Like so."

"But I won't be able —"

"Summer is eight months away," Timmons said. "Only a few hours longer than an Earth month."

"Oh, I never stay that long."

"We're a flourishing colony here," Crankin put in. "A long way from the last time you were here."

"I'm sure, but —" Jace turned to Timmons "—I think we all ought to go get something to eat. What with landing, I haven't had time —"

"Not us," Crankin said quickly. "We all have work to do. On a world like this — even in winter — it's work, work, work."

"I'll be glad to see you down," Timmons said.

"And Etta?"

"Of course."

"Fine, After two months in space, I'm sure I'll love any food."

"Our meat and produce are first-rate," Crankin said.

III

Great packs roam the woods:

Etta, now that Crankin and the others were no longer present, did not hesitate to dominate the conversation, but that was fine with Timmons, who had not as yet wholly adjusted to sitting face-to-face with the one man in the universe he had been able to admire for his entire life. To Timmon's immense relief, the food had proved to be excellent. During winter, the frozen stores, after thawing, many times turned out to be spoiled.

They sat around a small table in the public cafeteria.

"Well, you're certainly not a liar," Jace said, finally managing to penetrate Etta's wall of words. While he spoke, Jace continued to eat, gulping his meat with passionate eagerness, wiping his lips on his sleeve, swallowing huge gulps of beer. "This dinner is superb."

"A native creature," Timmons said.

"Yes, the *chaka,*" Etta said. "A large ursine mammal. During the winter, they hibernate. So we breed them carefully during the summer and slaughter just before the first snowfall. Great packs roam the woods near here and are easily captured."

"This must be a fascinating world."

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Etta laughed and shook her head. "Oh, no. Not really."

"Why do you say that?" Jace asked.

Timmons had found that he was not hungry but continued to stir the food on his plate politely and even raise an occasional spoonful to his lips. To keep from confronting Jace too directly, he had fixed his gaze upon Etta and soon discovered that it was really no wonder Jace had mistaken her for his daughter. Although actually thirteen, Etta might have passed for ten — even nine. She was small and dark, with large brown eyes, arms wider at the wrists than the biceps, and hardly any breasts at all. The native Stafwoldians themselves had very nearly been human duplicates, and Etta's alienness was not indicated by any particular feature but rather by the entire aura of her physique. She and Timmons had married four years previously. The reason was that Etta — alone among the colonists — was capable of appreciating *Canterbury Jones.* In common with all her mother's race, Etta possessed a curious empathetic ability, not telepathy. In her case, the talent extended to the appreciation of drama. She not only saw and heard Jace's work — but she felt it.

"Because of your own life," Etta was saying to Jace. "I mean, in space. It must be far more interesting than this world."

Jace laughed between bites. "Hardly." He belched. "Space is space. Nothingness. That's what the word means."

"There are stars."

"But, as you approach the speed of light, watching them becomes rather disconcerting. It can drive you nuts. So I don't watch. My ship is equipped with viewers only for landing."

"Then what do you do?"

"During the voyage? I compose, of course."

"And the rest of the time."

"I told you: I compose."

Jace cleaned his plate. Anticipating a request, Timmons signaled the waiter for more *chaka.*

"Thank you," Jace said. "You're beginning to read my mind."

Smiling in return, Timmons found nerve enough to ask; "How many worlds have you visited, Mr. Jace?"

Jace was smoking a thin white cigar. He settled back in his chair and blew smoke. His motions were slow, languid, those of an aged man, wholly at variance with his sharp, boyish looks. "That's hard to say. I have records, but you must keep in mind that human colonization is constantly pushing outward. I have been voyaging two thousand years now. When I left

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Earth, there were nineteen human worlds. And now —" he shrugged "— who can say?"

"This one wasn't here when you began."

"Ah, no. But I remembered Stafwold. It's why I came back."

"And you promised."

"Oh, I always promise." The *chaka* arrived. Jace chewed, then grinned. "Superb."

Gaining additional courage as he went along, Timmons now asked, "And how many dramas have you composed?"

"That I can tell you." Jace waved his spoon. "One for every world I have visited or revisited. Plus a few on Earth before the voyage. A couple dozen."

"How long will you be staying here?" This was Etta now.

Timmons nodded in her direction. "Until the drama is fully composed. Then I must go."

"It's too bad you can't stay until summer."

"No time, I'm afriad."

"But you must stay sometimes. To look around — see the people."

"Never."

"But your work —"

"My work deals in universals. Therefore, I have no need for particulars. Since I'm obviously composing for the ages, contemporary details are of no consequence."

"But where do you find anything to compose about? I don't mean to be rude, but — well, in a spaceship? Without viewers? Don't you need to see people now and then to compose about them?"

"I'm seeing some now," Jace said, smiling.

"But that can't be —"

"You must allow me my presumptions," Jace said. "As an artist, my work is the transformation of reality. I must raise the raw material of life to a higher, universal plane." The way Jace spoke, Timmons was certain he had been called upon to explain himself before. His tone was flat, unemotive. "The first necessity is strict objectivity. If I sit here and eat and talk with you, if I merely observe you, then fine. But if I were to fall in love with you, what a mess. Every time thereafter when I composed around the theme of love, I wouldn't be composing of love — but rather of our love. In finding the particular — no matter how delightful it might prove to be — I would lose the universal. The best way for me to know life is to stand clear of it."

"I just can't believe that you really mean that," Etta said.

"Would I lie to you?" Jace asked, leaning eagerly forward, anticipating her reply.

She smiled and shook her head. "I don't know, but I do think you might deceive yourself."

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"And, if so, I'd be the last to hear of it. Right?"

"Exactly. You forget, I feel I know you already. I've seen your drama a hundred times and I know you better than I know anyone here — even Timmons. And he knows you better than he knows me."

"I feel honored."

"Then ask him," Etta said. "Ask Timmons how he thinks, and he'll tell you."

"Will you?" Jace asked, swinging around to face Timmons.

"I — no," Timmons said. "No, I won't."

"See?" Etta cried. "That proves what I said. I don't know Timmons at all. But, Jace, I do know you."

IV

To surpass in splendor the grandeur of his treasure:

"But I don't entirely understand," Jace said, jabbing a fork into the midst of a fourth helping of the *chaka*. What exactly is it you feel I ought to know and see? Should I listen to common gossip? Should I —?"

Etta shook her head. "No, not exactly."

"Well, then — what?"

Timmons was staying deliberately apart from the conversation now. It seemed sufficient to him to be here listening to Arthur Jace, and, silently, he thanked Etta for leading the dramatist on.

"I'll try to give you an example," Etta said. "This is a story of my mother's people. Would you like to hear it?"

"Certainly," Jace said.

"And, Timmons, you don't mind?"

"Of course not, Etta."

"Then, to begin, there was once a great chieftain on Stafwold whose name was Entair and whose domain extended clear to the edges of the great continent. During winter he would send his legions streaming across the ice flows to exact tribute from the kings and chieftains of the lesser continents. Entair was the greatest ruler in the history of our world, and none dared challenge him. Soon enough, because of this, he acquired vast quantities of wealth. Nine large rooms in his palace were filled with his treasure."

"On Stafwold," Timmons explained, "copper was the most precious metal. Gold and silver and uranium were quite plentiful."

"But not jewels," Etta continued, "and three of Entair's rooms were filled with these. In truth, he seemed to have everything any man might desire, but actually one quantity was indeed lacking from his life, and that was a wife. Entair was a man of extreme pride and did not believe he could acquire just any woman as his wife. No, the wife of Entair must equal

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— no, surpass — in splendor the grandeur of his treasure.

"So, throughout his long reign, twenty of our years, fathers streamed to the court of Entair to offer their daughters in marriage. Each day, the great chieftain viewed many hundred women — most of surpreme beauty — and yet only a few did he even choose to consider. When a maiden impressed him, he would repair to those rooms in the palace housing his treasure and there he would meditate. In the end, he always reached the same decision: no, in spite of her great beauty, this woman could not be said to surpass the grandeur of his treasure. She could not become his wife. And so Entair grew old and worn, and it seemed to many that he must die without bringing forth an heir.

"Then at last his divine priest came to him one day and asked if he had heard the dire news. And Entair, who now spent all his time in the treasure rooms, replied that he had not.

"So the divine priest informed Entair that Corenya, divine goddess of love, had been exiled from heaven. It seemed that Onir — chieftain of the gods — had discovered Corenya locked in lustful embrace with her brother — Papyus, divine god of kindness and respect — and had, in supplication to the eighth of the divine commands, cast her down from heaven.

"Upon hearing this news, it was said that Entair immediately became many years younger. He ordered a mount and, though it was midwinter, soon rode forth alone into the Valley of the Hanging Sun, which lies directly below heaven itself. There he found Corenya, even more beautiful than his deepest imaginings, seated upon the side of a smooth rock. Entair came forward unhesitantly, and when Corenya turned at his approach, he halted and spoke his name and stated that he had come to seek her hand in marriage.

"Corenya said that, yes, she knew of Entair and his material riches and was aware that — even as a goddess — his request did her vast honor. Still, she was forced to say, another had already come to seek her hand, and so now she must decide between the two.

"Entair immediately demanded to know the identity of the other, and Corenya reached behind the smooth rock and drew forth a small, dark, hunched, wizened man dressed in the filthy robes of a *chaka* herder. He stated his name was Wolan and admitted he had indeed come to request the hand of the fallen goddess.

"Entair barely restrained his laughter upon being confronted with such extreme presumption.

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Turning to Corenya, he demanded that she choose at once.

"Corenya replied that she must first ask each of them a question. She must know why they had come to ask her hand.

"Entair replied first, saying he had searched his long life for a maiden truly deserving of his hand. He spoke of the vast treasure that filled his treasure house and of the need to discover a wife capable of surpassing in splendor the grandeur of this wealth. And now, he said, in you, great goddess, I have at last found what I have long sought.

"The herder, Wolan, with unexpected diffidence, merely stated his need for a loving wife to assist him in his many labors.

"When both had finished, the goddess, clearly pleased, clapped her hands, creating in the clash of flesh white stars that floated up and filled the sky in preparation for night. She replied that she would be able to grant to both men what they desired and then requested that they return at once to their homes. When they arrived, they would find waiting for them that which they had sought.

"Entair hastened to his steed and rode all that night and much of the following day. Reaching his palace, he rushed to the central treasure room, entered and found Corenya waiting. She lay upon a high shelf, life-size and glistening with awesome splendor: a diamond statue, but as cold and loveless as any rock.

"Wolan, the *chaka* herder, was never again seen in the domain of Entair. His fate, if any, can only be supposed."

When Etta finished, Jace smiled and clapped his hands. "That is a fine story and I like it very much. But I'm afraid I don't understand its pertinence. Are you trying to say I ought to become a collector of native folklore?"

"No, not that at all," Etta said.

"Then do explain."

"It wasn't folklore. That was the point. Nobody has ever heard that story before — not even me."

"You mean —?"

"Yes. I made it up — just now — on the spot — every word. That story was mine."

V

An intelligent alien native to the particular world:

They were alone down at the lowest level, Timmons and Jace, walking together at a swift clip. Etta had decided to remain behind in their quarters to prepare an extra room for Jace to occupy during his stay. Their feet beat a loud, careful rhythm as they moved down the long subterranean corridor. In spite of the thick insulation hugging the inner walls,

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their breath froze soon after leaving their lips.

"I'm sorry, Timmons," Jace said. "I've really been racking my brains since we met, but you'll have to tell me. I looked it up on the ship, but I'm afraid I've forgotten. Which drama is it I did here?"

"You really don't know?" Timmons said.

"I — well, I did know. But you understand — I've done so many and..." Jace shrugged, recovering his composure easily. He laughed and added, "When I'm done with a work, then I'm done with it. I've always worked that way. I know you understand."

Of course Timmons did. No — he corrected himself — he did not understand. But he pretended he did. *"Canterbury Jones."*

"Ah? Ah, yes?" Jace said.

Timmons went on: "A boy — Canterbury Jones — and an intelligent alien native to the particular world. The boy runs away from his colonial nest and takes the alien — a slave — with him. They journey together down a mighty continential river in a makeshift craft, passing other enclaves, having various adventures. But the real point is —"

"I do remember it now."

"It's an ironic comedy." He spoke this part easily; the words were the same as those he used while conducting tours of the museum — usually groups of young children. "The boy and the alien — their relationship — that is the genuine core of the drama. The boy is convinced he has committed a crime by stealing the slave, and yet, alone on the raft, in spite of their incredible differences, the two become —"

"I said I knew it," Jace said sharply.

"And so do I. By heart. I can quote any portion."

"You really like it?" Jace said, with unexpected anxiety in his tone. "You mean it holds up that well?"

Timmons smiled reassuringly. "Of course."

"Then, since you admire it so much, you really ought to take another quick look. Review your favorite parts. I can wait."

"But — but why?"

They had reached the viewing corridor and paused here. Jace stood with his back touching the rear wall. He seemed to deliberately avoid even glancing at the dozen rectangular peepholes that lined the opposite wall. Jace pointed vaguely toward the hidden room. "Because I have to dismantle it."

"Dismantle? *Canterbury Jones?*" Timmons failed to conceal the horror he felt.

"But I always do." Jace smiled compassionately and stepped over. He laid a hand on Timmon's shoulder. "You see, to me, it's only

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old work. I won't look at it myself and I don't want anyone else to, either. Not when I have something much greater to replace it with."

"But what could be better than *Canterbury Jones?*"

"Oh, anything — everything." He tapped his forehead. "But I can't tell you any more. I do my work in absolute secrecy. But — after I'm gone — then you can come down and see. And I think you'll admit I was right."

"But why *Canterbury?* I don't think you understand how important that work is — what it means to the whole colony."

"But I do know. To you — to every man on Stafwold — *Canterbury Jones* epitomizes art. You know nothing else because you simply haven't had time to produce art of your own. I understand — your entire lives must be spent tearing a meager living from a hostile world. To you, my work is frankly legend. I am not Arthur Jace, the man, but rather a part of a great myth. To destroy my work is the same as destroying the creations of a primitive people's god. But — to me — *Canterbury Jones* is only old work. And so —" he shrugged "—now, please, do open the door and let me in."

"Oh, yes — I'm sorry — here." Timmons fumbled at the door. In a moment, he had it open, and then, in spite of himself, he was peering inside the dark room. He saw them on the raft — Canterbury Jones and the black furry alien. It was night — a pair of golden moons hung in the sky. Canterbury's placid thoughts swept across Timmons's mind like water rushing down the river itself. He stepped back and turned his head aside.

Oblivious, Jace hurried past. Turning, he blocked the narrow doorway. "I won't be very long. I'm merely going to disrupt the general functioning."

"I can come get you for dinner."

"Yes, please, and when you do, if you don't mind, if you could, try to bring some strips of dark cloth. I won't need it now, but later — when I'm creating — it will be necessary to cover the peepholes."

"I see."

"Of course, if you like, you may come in and watch me now."

"No, I don't think so."

"Whatever you wish." Jace shrugged, then softly closed the door.

VI

The moons had fallen from the sky:

Laying aside the book she had been reading, placing it on top of a tall stack of similar books, Etta rolled noisely over in bed and faced Timmons far across the room.

"Want the light out?"

"Yes," Timmons said.

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"Good." In the darkness that followed, her voice seemed much nearer to him than it should have, as if she were lying right next to him in bed. "He's a sad, lonely man, isn't he?"

"Jace? Sad? I'd hardly say that. In fact, at times, he's almost delirious."

"I mean inside. He's lonely."

"Not that either."

"But he must be. Think of it. Traveling on that ship. For hundreds and hundreds of years. Working and composing but never really knowing anyone. It must be horrible. If he makes a friend on some world, by the time he returns, when he comes back, that friend has been dust for centuries."

"Not everyone, Etta, is exactly like you. Jace has his own values — his own priorities."

"And they just happen to be the same as yours?" She laughed. "Right, Timmons?"

"Not necessarily. I didn't say that."

"Oh, yes, you did. But you're wrong. I say Jace is a lonely man, and I ought to know because I felt it."

"Your feelings have been wrong before."

"Not this time. And, besides, Timmons, how would you —?"

"Don't say that." He sat up sharply. "Before you talk, think. Who knows more about loneliness than me? Who else has ever given up so much to be alone?"

"Not you. No, you did exactly what you wanted. You're still the same man, Timmons: alone but never lonely. I think you should've been the artist, not poor Jace. You were born with life at your fingertips, and you said, no, I'd rather crawl in my hole and rest. If you lost it — if they came and put you on the ship and said you had to dart back and forth across the galaxy — you wouldn't even notice you had lost anything."

"That's not being fair, Etta."

"No." She sighed loudly. "No, I suppose it isn't. But I just don't understand — not all of it. In the time we've been together, I've never once felt you touched or moved by anything. Not until now. Until what? Until Jace comes — a man you don't even know —"

"But that's where you're wrong. I do know Jace. Through his work, I know him better —"

"And who you'll never possibly see again. And then what? Then Jace says he's going to dismantle the *Canterbury*. Then you really get upset. You gnash your teeth and froth at the mouth and cry like a little baby. You —"

"So that's it: you're jealous."

"What?" She sounded shocked.

"Because you can't cry," he said. He was halfway out of bed, searching for his clothes. "Because

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you can't and I can."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous."

"Your people never could." He threw on his clothes carelessly in the dark. "They think they can feel what's going on inside a person, but they can't even cry."

"Couldn't," Etta said.

He stood up and moved cautiously across the room. "What?" he asked.

"I said couldn't. The past tense. They couldn't even cry. They're all dead now, Timmons. Did you forget?"

"No," he said, opening the door that led into the outer corridor. "And I'm going out."

"Where?" she called.

He paused, as if considering her question, then said quickly, "Nowhere," and hurried on out.

But saying nowhere was a lie. There was a place. Whenever this happened — whenever he was disturbed or distressed — Timmons knew exactly where he had to go: the museum, the viewing corridor. Only there, within the world of *Canterbury Jones*, could he find the necessary vision to see his own life in true perspective.

So deeply engrained was this response that Timmons was nearly there before he recollected that *Canterbury Jones* was no more. Jace had completed the dismantling after dinner. The manikins lay upon the floor, silent and still as real death. The moons had fallen from the sky, and the great blue river no longer flowed.

Timmons stopped where he was and fell against the soft corridor wall, biting fiercely on his lower lip.

Finally, he made himself turn around. Then, carefully, he retraced his steps. There was only one possible place to go now. It wasn't Etta's fault. She wanted him to think so, but no. Etta was a child, and Timmons made it a point never to expect her to act otherwise. Timmons knew children — Canterbury Jones himself was barely a boy.

He came to the place he sought and stopped and then, after a long pause, threw open the door. It was another long moment before he switched on the light.

Here in the extra room Jace lay sleeping in the center of a huge, deep bed. His thick hair covered the pillow. His chest rose and fell with strict regularity. Timmons smiled in sudden relief. Now he knew that this was what he had feared. Of course. If Jace were to die now. With *Canterbury* dismantled and the replacement not yet begun. No wonder he couldn't sleep. If Jace were to die, then so would he, spiritually, if not physically.

Suddenly, a pair of eyes were open. Jace frowned. "Is something the matter, Timmons?"

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"No — I mean yes. I'm sorry, but I wanted to make sure you were all right."

Jace looked down at himself. "I seem to be fine. Except for being awake. I think I should be sleeping."

"I know but — you're not cold?"

"Not at all." Jace smiled. "Under all this, I could be asleep inside a star."

"Then I really am sorry."

"Oh, forget it."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes."

When Timmons arrived back in his own bedroom, Etta was awake and the light was burning. Her pile of books — at least two dozen volumes — lay spread across the surface of her bed. While Timmons undressed, she went from one book to another, flipping open the pages at random, reading briefly, sometimes smiling, then going on. Timmons did not know how to read. Few Stafwoldians could. Etta had been taught by her father. The books had also been his.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked, back under the covers.

"Not a bit," she said.

VII

My lips are sealed with ice:

"It's coming marvelously," Jace said, waving his arms expansively. In front of him was a plate of the *chaka*, but he barely took time to sniff it. "I've never, in my entire career, had a piece take shape — literally form itself — never in this way, so quickly and easily. I know when I'm done you're all going to be amazed. Your world will be properly graced. You'll fall in love with it — you in particular, Timmons — I'm promising you. I'm going to call it—" But he stopped himself, drifting off with a slight smile, clearly recalling his own proscriptions to secrecy.

Timmons looked down at his plate, as if some taboo subject had suddenly been interjected into the conversation. Etta sat across from him, at Jace's side. After two weeks of constant company, unlike Timmons, she felt no hesitancy in Jace's presence.

"You're calling it what?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Etta," Timmons whispered.

"No, no," said Jace. "I don't want to tease. I'm calling it — there's no reason not to tell — *The Beast of Grayspace.*"

"You're joking now," Etta said.

"Not in the least. Let me explain. Grayspace is nothingness. I mean I made it up myself. But it's not fantasy. Many physicists have hypothesized the possible existence of an alternate universe where the laws of relativity would not apply. To go from Stafwold to, say, Earth, one would merely enter the

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grayspace universe here and exit there. The trip would be — in our time — instantaneous. Of course, if it did happen, then my voyage would be rendered ridiculous. I'd have to choose between continuing or else accepting the end of my trip. But it doesn't seem —"

"Well, which?" Etta asked, leaning over and grasping Jace's hand. "Go ahead and choose."

"Oh, no, you don't." Laughing, Jace drew back. "I refuse even to consider it. Grayspace is a device. It fitted the needs of my story."

"How did it fit?" she asked.

Once more Timmons tried to caution her no, but Jace, without hesitation, replied:

"My story deals with the beast of grayspace: a vast white creature who lives there. A certain spaceman takes his ship and crew and enters the region intent upon finding and slaying the beast. Instead —"

"Why?" Etta asked.

"Huh? Why what?"

"Why kill it? The beast?"

"Because — well, the captain doesn't understand that —"

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I wrote it, didn't I?"

"Of course you did, Arthur. It's an allegory."

"Yes, I suppose you could say

"About good and evil."

"Uh . . . yes."

"Well, then which is it? I want to know. The beast — good or evil?"

"That," he said, smiling, "is for you to decide."

"But I can't. Not for weeks. Until you're gone — and then it won't matter."

"Then —" he clapped his hands sharply "— there's only one thing we can do. Tomorrow, come down to the museum with me. You can look, make up your mind, and tell me."

"It can't be finished already."

"Oh, no, but I think there's enough for you to decide. If not, we can try again later."

"I really don't think —" Timmons began.

"Shall we let him decide?" Jace said, pointing a finger across the table. He turned. "Timmons, it's your museum. What do you say?"

"Yes," Etta said. "What do you say, Timmons?"

"I — by all means." Timmons spoke calmly; the tone of his voice was flat and even. "Go," he told Etta. "See it."

"But she must promise not to reveal a thing of what she will see," Jace said.

"Then I do," Etta said. She turned her attention to her meal, as if the matter was settled, but a moment later she looked up and said, "Why won't you tell him, Timmons? When I've got a secret, my lips are sealed with solid ice."

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"Are they really?" Jace asked.

Timmons said, "Yes — with ice."

VIII

An awful cacophony of hammering, sawing, chiseling:

Timmons could not have said for certain why he kept coming down here day after day. That first day, undoubtedly, it was mere curiosity. And maybe on the second day, even the third, too. But after that? Now? The most likely solution — he reluctantly admitted this to himself — was that he came down here to the viewing corridor every day simply out of habit. Because — with Etta inside — where else was he supposed to go?

The truth, Timmons knew, was that he was both bored and worried. Bored because there was nothing to do; worried because his daily existence had always been an orderly thing, with each possible moment easily arranged and fitted into a definite and predetermined pattern. There were the tours to conduct, recitations to be spoken. But that mode of life had centered around the museum, and the museum was no more. For a full month the door to the main room had been sealed to him. Canterbury Jones was dead forever, and his substitute — the beast of gray-space—? had not yet been delivered. Jace had promised. Two weeks, he had said in the beginning. Now Timmons could not help wondering. What was the reason behind the delay? Was Etta's presence to blame? As he thought, he reached into his pocket and fingered the duplicate key he had carefully, and secretly, retained from the beginning. Would it be wrong? Once, only once, just so he could know.

He usually arrived here at midday. Sometimes Jace and Etta got here first, and he didn't see them; more often, he did. After they entered the room, he did nothing. Dark cloth, reinforced from the inside, shielded the peepholes. Occasionally, without conscious intent, he would overhear them inside. They hammered, chiseled, sawed. Sometimes, dimly, he heard them talking or laughing, and one day, two weeks ago, he had clearly heard Jace shouting and then, right afterward, an awful cacophony of hammering, sawing, chiseling had erupted and lasted the remainder of the day. But usually he heard nothing at all. At dinnertime, they came out. Seeing him, they smiled, nodded, stopped to chat. At times they might ask him to join them for dinner and accompany them someplace afterward. But he made it a point to refuse, though politely. He didn't think —

Ah, He banished these

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thoughts. Here they came now. The door opened — he heard a clatter, laughter — then Etta stepped through. Smiling, her hands held out, she came toward him. Jace followed, pausing first to lock the door.

"You really ought to find something else to do," Etta said, when the three of them stood together.

"What?" Timmons asked.

She shrugged. "Read a book."

"You know I can't read," Timmons said, irritably.

"Then why not write one?" Jace asked. He smiled at Etta.

"Where — where are you going tonight?" Timmons asked.

"Why?" Jace said. "Do you want to come along?"

"I just wondered."

"To the Turkas area," Etta said. "They're producing a play."

"Oh," Timmons said.

Etta laughed and pointed. "He thinks our local work is too crude for noticing."

"In comparison to something like —"

Jace cut him off. "No need, please, no need."

"But are you sure you won't come?" Etta asked.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry, but not this time."

"Then maybe we'll see you later," Jace said.

"I hope so," Timmons said.

Jace nodded. Etta took his hand and they went off together. Timmons watched them with no particular feeling. He saw their locked hands swaying. He shrugged and turned away.

When their footsteps had faded wholly away, Timmons moved forward. He did not allow himself to hesitate. He had made a silent vow. Reaching into his pocket, he removed the duplicate key. Quickly he fitted it into the lock and turned his hand. The door popped smoothly open.

Timmons stepped inside.

In the dark, he searched for the lights. He found the wall switch easily enough but, before flicking it down, deliberately shut his eyes.

He knew what he was doing: increasing the anticipation. But that was what he wanted: it would make the final moment of revelation so much sweeter. He started to giggle, fully aware, now that he was actually inside the room, with the light burning ahead of his sealed lids, of the utter significance of this moment.

He was going to see it: a new work; by Arthur Jace.

When he began to cry, he had to open his eyes. It took a moment for his eyes to clear. At last, he could see.

But what he saw at first was the one thing he had never expected to find here: chaos. Broken glass,

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twisted wire, cracked plastic. The floor was heaped and covered; passage was nearly impossible.

Timmons stood where he was, trying to control his surprise. He was afraid he would shout out. His eyes veered wildly into the air, and, doing so, he finally saw the manikin. It hung down from the ceiling, suspended by wires attached to thin pale arms. Through the unfinished flesh of the back bones and organs could clearly be seen. If nothing else, Jace was a thorough creator.

From its shape, Timmons was certain the manikin was a woman.

In *Canterbury Jones* all the central characters had been men. Many people, including Timmons, had speculated upon the reasons for this.

He rushed forward, kicking a path through the rubble and debris. Reaching the manikin, he grabbed the cold taut flesh of the thighs and turned it. He wanted to see the face.

Would she be beautiful?

The face was flaccid, dead.

But she was beautiful.

He cried out, staggered back, struggled to reach the door.

He went out.

In the corridor he threw the key into the first rubbish bin he passed. Then — his obligation complete — he ran through the underground halls as swift as a rocket.

The face of the manikin surged in front of him like a dreamy vision turned to flesh and bone. *Etta, Etta, Etta,* he thought.

For hers was the face he had seen.

Etta!

IX

— from here and — here: —

Because he stopped going down to the viewing corridor, it was several days after seeing the manikin before Timmons spoke with Jace again. And this time Jace came to him.

The time was late evening. Timmons sat in the central room of his private quarters. He was smoking a pipe, and the fragrant odor of native tobacco filled the air. Etta had not been home all day. Timmons could not help thinking of her. He saw her face in every cloud of smoke, heard her voice at the slightest noise.

But when the door swung open at last, it was Jace who stood there.

"May I talk to you for a minute?" he asked.

"Why?" Timmons asked, cautiously.

"There's something I want to ask you."

"Is Etta there too?"

"She's in my room."

"Then —" Timmons pointed to an empty chair facing his "—Come in and sit."

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Jace entered the room eagerly but did not sit. "I feel," he said, pacing in front of Timmons's chair, brushing a hand through the thick smoke, "in the time we've known each other, we've got to — well, know each other; and I can't help feeling that we — well, that you know me."

"I appreciate your saying that," Timmons said, with purposeful ambiguity. He did not intend to reveal a thing to this man.

"So," Jace said, "being friends, we ought to be able to speak straight out. No reason to hold anything back."

"That could be true." His pipe had gone out. He searched the floor for a match.

"So what I want — I want you — no, I want to tell you — about — about my drama."

"Go ahead."

Smiling, Jace dropped suddenly into the empty chair. But his hands continued to move. "You do remember?" he asked. "What I told you? The beast of grayspace?"

"I think I do. Vaguely."

"Well, what did you think?"

"A brilliant concept." He lit the pipe and puffed deeply.

Jace coughed. "Yes, yes," he said, hurriedly. "But — and, well, I think this is the question: a brilliant concept for whom? Me?"

"That's a question you'll have to answer for yourself."

"I did. I answered no."

Timmons shrugged. "So what are you doing now?" he asked, gazing into the smoke nearest him.

"That doesn't matter. What does matter is why I decided to change. And that — that's what I want to tell you. It — the reason — it was Etta."

"Oh, yes?"

"Yes." Jace nodded sharply and returned to his feet. He loomed above Timmons. "I'm not going to try to lie. Etta. Your wife. Etta. She inspired me to — well, you must remember what she said. I was missing out on life. And she was right."

"No!" Timmons cried. He also stood up. "Don't listen to that. Etta is a child. She's not even human. She can't —"

"She knows," Jace said, sadly. "She can feel things."

"Not always. Not all the time. I ought to know. She misses things."

"Not this."

"Yes!"

"No." Jace looked down. He spoke with deliberate softness. "I can remember how it began. Centuries ago — to you, though not to me — it was so different then. My compositions sprang from a real need, from —" he slapped his chest, glancing up "— from here and —" he touched his forehead "— here. But I stopped. I couldn't do it any more. But — instead of

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stopping — I kept on going. I couldn't do anything else. Etta explained to me. Now I have to change."

"Change? After *Canterbury Jones?* Don't be —"

"It wasn't me!" Jace shouted. "I —" He was plainly striving to get a grip on himself. Suddenly, he sat down and held his chin in his hands. "So that's what I came to ask — to tell you. Timmons, I can't leave here. Not — not without Etta."

"I see." Timmons remained standing. "And what does she say?"

"I don't know."

"You mean you haven't asked her."

"No."

"Then do."

"You mean —"

"Etta is a grown person capable of forming her own decisions. She's the one to ask — not me."

"You don't care?"

"I said," said Timmons, relighting his pipe for the final time, "ask her."

X

My father freed your people:

Jace, leaving, promised Timmons he would return that same night with Etta's reply. "I don't care how late it is," he said.

Timmons smiled and waited for the door to shut. Extinguishing his pipe, alone now at last, he thought, *No.* He was tired, drained, spent. Tonight had lasted far too long already, and it was time to tie a knot in the tail end of it. Standing, he moved hastily through clouds of thick smoke. He found his bedroom, lay down, and in a moment was asleep.

And yet it must have been that same night — or, perhaps, very early the next morning — when he suddenly awoke and became aware that a light was burning in the room.

He heard the soft gentle noise of steady breathing.

Silently, he turned over. Etta lay on top of the bed very close to him. She held a book propped open in her lap, but his attention was drawn below, to the place where a ring of fiery fur formed a circle around her navel. This was the first outward manifestation he had yet discovered of the alienness that lay down within her.

He said, "You haven't been here long."

She turned at the sound of his voice, not surprised, and shook her head. "No." She laid her book aside. "I came here to tell you."

"Tell me what?" he asked, sitting up beside her.

"Of what I decided."

"Which is?"

"No — not yet. First: why did you send him to me?"

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"Why?" He shrugged. "Because — I suppose — because I felt it was your right to make up your own mind." He smiled tenderly and nearly touched the tip of her shoulder with a hand. "I remembered that Father freed your people. You're not a slave any more."

She drew away from him. "You were afraid, weren't you?"

"Afraid? Why would I be afraid?" He laughed, but realizing, as soon as the noise left his lips, how artificial and forced it sounded.

"Yes," she said, "you were afraid because this time you knew you were going to lose something. That had never happened to you before, had it, Timmons?"

"Lose?" His laughter was genuine this time. "I lost everything. I could have been —" he waved a hand at the colony above "— commander. I could have been — anything. I lost it all. For you."

"But you never wanted to be commander. That time doesn't count. What counts is now."

"Then he won't?" Timmons said.

"No, he won't." She shook her head and smiled bitterly. "There's no way out, Timmons. If I stay here, then he goes.

"He won't finish the drama. He'll destroy what he's done, then go."

"He told you?"

"I know."

"Then," he said, "then you won't go."

"That's up to you. I'm bringing it back to you, Timmons. If you ask me to stay, then I will."

Hearing this, for the first time, Timmons understood exactly what she intended. He knew he should be angry, but the emotion would not come. He said nothing.

Etta pointed down at the ring of fur upon her belly. "Because of this."

"You can't expect me to beg you," he said.

"That's exactly what I do expect."

"Didn't I marry you?"

"That," she said, "was not enough." Her fingers clutched the bedsheets. Her eyes were half closed. "You still have to ask."

He tried another tactic. "From the moment Jace arrived you've had this in mind. Perhaps even before."

"I felt sorry for him."

"You felt sorry for him? For Arthur Jace?"

"Yes, I did."

"And do?"

"Yes."

"But you love him."

"No, he's —"

"Then go with him."

"Did you say —?"

"I said," he said, "go with him."

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She nodded grimly, then turned her face away. "You want it — not me."

"I didn't say that. I merely said I wouldn't stop you."

"Then that isn't it." She turned back to face him. "It is me you want, but — if you asked — then you'd be admitting we are the same. And, if I am, then so were all the others. And he killed them."

"That has nothing to do with it," he said truthfully. For the fact was that he had suddenly realized what his eyes should have told him days ago: he would have both — her and it.

"You liar!" she screamed.

XI

Love of Love:

"Have you seen it yet?" Timmons asked Etta. She occupied the cafeteria chair nearest to him. The room was filled with noisy celebrants, but their own table — he and she and Arthur Jace — was a pocket of dignified silence amid the general hubbub. Elsewhere, officials and dignitaries table-hopped like mad; drinks were poured and swallowed. Half the colony was squeezed in her, and nobody seemed to want to leave until it was all over.

"No, I haven't," she said.

"Don't you want to?"

"It's really not necessary."

Crankin was coming their way. Timmons drew back and folded his arms across his chest. It was funny. From the time Jace arrived, none of them had expressed the slightest interest either in the man's presence or in his work in progress. But now that he was done — now that he was actually leaving any minute — they had all come back in force. It was impossible to keep any of them away from Jace and Etta for more than a few moments.

Jace spoke before Crankin reached their table: "What Etta means is that she's seen all the parts. She doesn't have to watch it whole. She already knows it better than I do."

"And what —?" Timmons started to ask Etta.

"She wept," Jace interrupted. "I'll never forget how she cried like a little baby. It nearly made me cry too, and I'm the one who did it."

Crankin spoke then, telling Jace how eagerly everyone was anticipating the first performance of his new story. While the two men talked, Jace leaned over and asked Etta, "Is it really that good?"

"What else could it be?"

"It could —"

But Crankin slipped away as suddenly as he had come, and Jace, free now, turned immediately back to Timmons. "I must tell you just how much I appreciate all this, Timmons. I can only hope my drama will be good enough to make

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up for everything else. I even feel I owe you something — a hint. Hey, I know, I'll tell you what, I'll tell you the title. Don't breathe a word: it's *Love of Love.*"

"Ask him what it's about," Etta told Timmons.

"No, no," said Jace, laughing. "No more secrets."

A whole pack of them was coming over now, Crankin bustling in the lead. Timmons discovered a glass of pale liquid upon the table and drank it down. Crankin pleaded with Jace to make a farewell speech. In the light of such attention, Jace barely protested. He was boosted to the tabletop, where he clapped his hands. The room fell silent in progressive phases, a steady procession — one ring of tables, then another — like the ripples in a disturbed pool.

Jace said, "I just want to say how much I have appreciated the wonderful treatment afforded to me since I first arrived on Stafwold. It — frankly — exceeded my wildest expectations and —"

Timmons discovered a second glass and drank that. A few people were giggling softly at Jace, but most had more control. Crankin slid into the unoccupied seat and leaned over to whisper, "You don't have to stay here and listen to this. Just get up and walk out — fuck them."

"I never have," Timmons said.

"I don't —"

"He doesn't know what he's saying." Timmons pointed to Jace above them. "I don't give a damn."

Crankin shrugged. "Have it your own way."

While Jace droned on, Timmons moved his chair closer to Etta. Behind his hand, he whispered:

"It is over now, isn't it?"

"Then you do know." She was plainly surprised.

"I can tell, listening to him. He won't destroy it now. If you wanted, you could stay; he'd still go."

"Yes. But would that be fair?"

"You told me you didn't care about him."

"But what about you? Then you'd have both — me and it. That's what wouldn't be fair."

"Then you won't stay?"

"You can ask me."

"Still that?"

"Yes, you have to ask."

"I won't beg."

"Ask — don't beg."

"I —" He permitted her the privilege of a long pause, pretending to consider. "— I can't."

"Is he that important to you? What does it matter? He's dead."

"He is," Timmons cried, "but I'm not."

Later, while Jace continued to speak, she said, "I've left a gift for you. When you get home, it'll be on the bed."

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"What?" he asked.

"Just my books."

He laughed. "Take them with you — I can't read."

"Jace, I'm sure, has a very extensive library. I want you to have them. There's a man in the Clicket area who can teach you. Go to him and find out."

"Why? Is there some secret buried in those old books?"

"Yes — but it's not mine."

Jace was finishing up "...wish that I could stay here longer, but the mission I have chosen in life — the reason I'm here in the first place — my duty requires me to spread the riches of my talents across the sparkling face of the galaxy. I cannot stay, but at least this time —" he bowed bluntly at Etta "— I shall not be leaving alone."

The applause that followed the completion of his remarks was more embarrassed than anything. Crankin looked at Timmons and shook his head sadly.

But Jace did not appear to notice. He bounded off the table and began shaking hands.

Timmons turned away and looked at Etta. "Good-by," he said, "and—"

"Good-by, Timmons."

XII

The Treasure in the Treasure House:

And now, the rumbling thrust of the departing ship firmly part of the past, it was time for Etta to return.

Timmons stood in the viewing corridor, his face pressed tightly against the soft rim of padded foam that surrounded the rectangular glass of the peephole. Beyond him the room was dark. But not for long. Jace had programmed it to begin the moment his ship left the atmosphere. Etta would leave — then come back.

The corridor was hot and crowded. Behind Timmons, a swirl of bodies moved. The peepholes were occupied, and many men were waiting. For all Timmons knew, he could have been alone. He refused to recognize their presence, did not hear the rumble of their excited babbling. His eyes were focused — his face pressed. As he stood, he felt the sting of tears running down both his cheeks. He blinked and sniffled, but the tears would not stop flowing. Why? She wasn't gone. She was right here — in there. He had seen her once before — long ago. *Etta, Etta, Etta.*

Then — suddenly — a bright yellow light burned inside the room. As if from a great distance, he heard a voice:

"It's coming."

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Then there was silence.

Timmons did not move. He barely bothered to breathe. As if by magic, his eyes ran dry.

Then the drama began.

She appeared — his treasure — Etta. She stood in the center of the room, seeming to gaze straight at him, more real than any fixed reality they might have shared over the years. He saw that she stood upon a wide rocky beach. She was alone — and naked. He saw the circular tuft of fur upon her abdomen, the tiny pink ridges of her breasts. She smiled. Behind her, huge green waves pounded and heaved, lashing the shoreline.

Then her thoughts reached him. He listened intently, as if receiving whispered revelations from on high. *I love him more than any woman ever loved a man — since Eve kissed Adam's bare feet.* And Timmons thought, *Yes, yes, that's true* — and now his tears came back.

Beside him, someone tittered sharply.

Then Jace appeared. He seemed to materialize directly from Etta's thoughts, coalescing from the insubstantial matter of her dreams. When she saw him, Etta cried out and threw her hands high overhead. She thought, *Oh, Arthur, my darling darling Arthur, oh my love, oh love of loves of love.* Reaching out, Jace grabbed her hands, and together they fell to the beach. Their arms enclosed one another. Then Jace kissed her and, the moment their lips touched, a great green wave crashed down upon them.

Someone groaned. There was laughter — growing and growing. "Get out of my way!" "Hey, I want to see!" "Is it funny?" "Oh, God, is it ever awful!"

Timmons watched the drama, face pressed tightly and impassively to the peephole, seeing the green water as it swirled and swished around the entwined nude bodies.

Then Etta spoke: "I must state that I love you dearly, oh, my darling, darling Arthur."

"And you, Etta, are the blue in my sky — the fire that burns in the starlight of my heart."

Kneeling, facing one another, they kissed again and again. In her thoughts, Etta said, *Love is the curse that burns a woman's heart like the flames at the core of an exploding star. No one — human or otherwise — can live without its sacred light. Love is the bright green leaf lying hidden amid the barren wastes of space and time.*

Timmons swayed. He told her: *Etta, I love you.*

Around him, the commotion spread. Glass shattered — peepholes broke. Voices were shouting. Waves of laughter rocked higher and higher.

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But Timmons heard none of this.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. A voice was screaming in his ear. But he was telling Etta: *Stay, stay, stay. Do you hear me? I'm asking you now — no, I am begging you. Stay with me — always.*

Powerful hands finally drew him away. He glanced wildly around and saw a maze of flickering lights and surging motion. Nothing made sense to him. Crankin's face kept bobbing in front of his eyes:

"Come away from here. Don't torture yourself. That wasn't even Jace. The bastard hoaxed us."

"No! That was Jace!" Timmons cried. And that —" he pointed back at the peephole, wishing to return there "— that is Etta!"

"It's a manikin," Crankin told him tightly. "It's a dumb, stupid, senseless hunk of —".

"That's her!" Timmons cried. "Can't you see? She's mine now — my treasure. That's Etta in there. My treasure in the treasure house."

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Dean McLaughlin ("The Trouble With Project Slickenside," March 1973) is back with an entertaining tale about a literary agent who finds a buyer for "Cosmic" rights, which, even in the sf field, has to be considered all gravy.

West Of Scranton And Beyond The Dreams Of Avarice

by DEAN McLAUGHLIN

What's cosmic rights?

Might be, that's for me to know and you to find out. You and me, Tolliver, we're both in the agency racket. Why should I tip off my hand?

Sure. I know. This literature business, it's a bit genteel most of the time. Most of the time, we don't compete with each other at all. Oh, there's situations where, say, Herman Goldbrick is wanting a property to lavish seventeen million rasbusnicks on — and incidentally screen up a flick while he's at it — and when that happens, all of us operators are going to meet each other going into his Park Ave office, or coming out with the manuscript still under our elbows, coughing from all that cigar smoke. But most of the time, you're right, the job's just a matter of finding a comfortable home for our client's latest triumph of literary art, haggling over the money part and some of the small print in those contracts — they'll steal you blind if you're not careful — and sometimes you hawk the subsidiary rights yourself, and possibly the foreign rights — but then sometimes you let the publisher you've made the contract with do all that. And when you've got the package all wrapped up, you sit behind your desk and watch your client take ninety percent of your money.

So, like I say, we don't really compete, and we're friends even if you did once steal a client out from under my nose. Besides which, you want to know just what you're selling, and what it is I'm wanting to buy. You're entitled to some kind of answer.

So where's a good place to begin? Good as any, I suppose,

**This title may be misleading. The astute reader will notice the story does not include a character named Avarice. DMcL*

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there's Sebastian Schwartz and me with our aperitifs between us, just like you and me are right now, doing our best to keep our fingers on the grapevine by weaving it back and forth. And Sebastian has just told me that clod at Oblivion Press — you know the one I mean, the one who sent me back that Cordwainer Bird manuscript, obviously blind to its artistic *and* best-seller qualities — he's now, suddenly, Sebastian tells me, moved down the street to Nirvana House, complete with a whole trunkful of manuscripts (including two of mine!) because they changed the locks on the executive washroom and he's still got only the old key. We've been trading stuff like that all through lunch, and swapping brags, and now it's my turn to deliver Sebastian a tidbit out of my ever-fresh repertoire..

I lean back and light up — make a real production out of it — and I say, "Tell me what you make of this."

He looks interested, curious, like he's supposed to. I go on.

"Last week ... early last week ... I had this phone call. Turns out, it was a guy in a little burg in Pennsylvania. West of Scranton someplace. He wants to buy what he calls cosmic rights to Janvier's *The Armiger ...*"

"That pretentious turkey?" Sebastian asks.

"Maybe it closed in Buffalo," I tell him, "but I sold flick rights to Merlin Productions for a hundred thirty — that's thousand — plus half a percent of the gross. They haven't got it into production yet, but ... but getting back, this funny guy somewhere out in the backside of nowhere wants cosmic rights. So I ask him, what's cosmic rights? I'd never heard of that market before. And he says it's the whole universe. Everything except the world."

I watch Sebastian while I'm telling this, but Sebastian — he's been in the business a long, long time. He'd make a poker player look like Harpo Marx.

"It takes me a while," I tell Sebastian, "to get it straight that isn't one of my creative geniuses having himself a large chuckle between bourbons, but once I get that out of the way, I start catching on this bird really means what he says, and even if he's a prize cockatoo, that's no reason I shouldn't grab myself a few green feathers. On the other hand, it doesn't pay to grab too fast. Give 'em rope. So I tell him, look, there's that dinky little Siberia about five hundred miles west — east? — of Tranquillity Base, but ... and he comes right back, oh, I can keep lunar rights. He'll let me keep the whole solar system if I want. But he's *got* to have everything else."

Sebastian at least has the

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decency to nod. He's a real gentleman, Sebastian is.

"Well," says I, "I point out to this guy, the universe is a big place. He says that's all right. He's always believed it was large. I tell him it'll cost him five thou, setting it up high like that to scare him off, in case it was that kind of nut ... and ... Sebastian baby, you're not going to believe this ..."

"Are you sure?" Sebastian asks.

"He says fine. Would you believe it? He says it's a deal, without any haggle, and he'll mail the check that afternoon. But because the mail's sort of slow from where he is, I may not get it for a couple of days."

"And did he?" Sebastian asks.

I notice Sebastian's glass is empty, and I start to wave for the waiter. But Sebastian puts a hand over the glass. I shrug and go on.

"Came in Thursday's mail," I tell him. "Five thou. From something called the Exotic Transactions Foundation, Inc., and written on some bank I never heard of. Being my usual careful self, I pick up the phone and call *my* bank, and after they go scratching in their books, they say, sure there's a bank named that, and not only that, they're where they say they are. And, yes, it's a little paducah west of Scranton. They're even happy to provide the number of the phone out there. Well, I'm in it this far — why not? I call 'em, and they tell me, sure the check's good — assuming the signature's valid — so I beep it through on the visual and they say, yup, that's how he writes it, and, yup, this foundation's account is so good they'd rather have it than all the buffalo chips in Texas."

Sebastian smiles. Did I cash it, he wants to know.

"What do you think I am?" I ask. "I'd made a deal, hadn't I? Fair and honest, hadn't I? And he wanted to buy — right? Sure I cashed it."

By then Sebastian is collecting his coat and his hat and his umbrella and his attache case, and somehow managing not to notice the bill our waiter has suddenly got around to putting face-down on our table with a corner bent up to make it easy to snatch. He's muttering something about got to get back to the office.

What's the hurry all of a sudden, I want to know.

"Why, I think I'd best go and cash *my* check," he says. He perks hat on head at that jaunty gentleman's angle he always does just right.

"*Your* check. You mean you got one too?"

He buttons the last button on his coat. "Why, yes, as a matter of fact. Yes."

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"How much?"

"That," says he, sketching the air with a fingertip, "would be to violate a confidence between myself and a client."

He's right. We do it all the time, but he's right. And I'm jumping up and down. "What for? What piece off a horse did he want from your bunch of nags?"

He's looking right past me like I was the guy leading Lady Godiva's palfrey. "Waldo's *Seashell,* if you must know." He says it with just the right amount of diffidence.

"That old chestnut?" I have to say it.

"Howard," he says. He pulls himself up straight. "Howard, if it's literary criticism you want, you should never have canceled your subscription to *Forum.*"

And with that he walks out on me. And there's our waiter, waiting for his tip.

When I get back to my office, I pick through the mail which has finally just come. One of the reasons I stay out to lunch as late as I usually stay out to lunch is because a man can flake off half an afternoon waiting for Uncle Samuel's men in blue to bring what turns out to be only the electric bill and last week's issue of *Publisher's Weekly.* And today there's a single-space letter eight pages long from Calvin K — you know who I mean — explaining why he suddenly can't write the last chapter of the novel he promised for two years ago, because now every word he puts on paper doesn't feel right any more, and his analyst says it's because ... well, never mind. And there's a check for $7.69, which is from anthology royalties for *Sven,* the only story I ever managed to sell for Lewis Tarbuckle — or whatever the name was — in two years of bush beating; after which, thanks to the reputation it got him (and that, by the way, partly because of where I managed to plant it), what does Tarbuckle do but pick up and switch to one of those incorporated General Motors type agencies where they've got twenty desks and they expect to get paid not less than ten cents a word, even if the words happen to be the "good morning" the switchboard girl says when she answers the phone. "They understand me better," Tarbuckle says.

Maybe they understand him, but thanks to the arrangement I have with all my clients, I still own a piece of *Sven.* Anybody that wants to buy rights, he buys 'em from me.

I take the check back to the outer office and drop it on Lucy's desk, who is my secretary and errand girl, and tell her to bank it.

"You mean we get paid this week?" she asks.

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"One of us does," I tell her.

She straightens up a little. "And Neville called — you know, the Neville at Tide, Ink? — and he says they need fifteen hundred words about the latest Supreme Court decisions on interstate commerce not later than next Wednesday afternoon."

I think a minute. "Call George. If he's not too deep in the bottle, put him to work."

"But George doesn't know a thing about ..."

"He can find out." I think some more. "Listen, if it sounds like he's got too much shampoo in his mouth, give it to Bob Randall." Bob had looked sort of seedy, last time he was up to the office. Hadn't even shaved.

"I think they were hoping you'd give it to William."

Notice, she said William, not Bill. William is always William, and he is the highest price stud in my stable of otherwise grossly undervalued (in this crass, commercial age) thoroughbred workhorses. William is there in the tax brackets so high up the mountain he keeps a full-time secretary who types every word he talks to the tape machine, which is never far from his lips. I sometimes think she also cleans up the grammar and dirties the words. I hardly hesitate at all.

"What's the pay?" I ask.

"Standard rates," Lucy shrugs.

She's got a lot to learn about this business. "They'll get George and be happy," I say. If I gave every job tossed my way to William, what would the rest of my people eat? Besides, William doesn't work for nickels and dimes.

"All right," Lucy says. "But I'm sure they'd rather have William."

I don't bother to answer. I'm started toward my sanctum sanctorum when the phone rings.

Lucy grabs it. "DeVoe Agency," she burbles. She listens a minute, then holds it out. "It's Max Pinkham at Chauncy Scribblers."

I pause in the doorway. Over my shoulder, I tell her, "I'll take it in here. Listen in and take notes."

Max is a real pussycat, and I've been diddling him for three weeks now on a contract for a red-blooded *Grapes of Wrath* type epic about life and death on the Indian reservations by my client Timothy Horsefeather who — as it happens — has a PhD from Yale in comparative literature, whatever that is, and lives in Trenton, New Jersey, but those are details I've somehow neglected to tell Max. We get the usual how's the wife and kiddies throat clearing done and settle down to business.

"Look," I tell him. "What my client doesn't understand is how come a fine old respectable house like Chauncy Scribbler's Sons

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should expect to take a forty percent chunk of British and translation rights, when all Chauncy Scribbler is doing is publish it in the US of A, and offering only an eight thousand five hundred advance for the once-in-a-lifetime privilege of placing it before the public. There you have it in the proverbial eggshell."

Max sounds as patient as Mohammed waiting for the mountain. "Howard, you understand these things. I'm sure you do. Explain to him. We plan to promote this book. Spend some real money on it. It has tremendous potential, but we have to get the word out to people — tell them about it. That's expensive, Howard. You should talk to some of our people in the promotion department someday — perhaps lunch next week? What's a good day? They'll tell you just how costly it is to launch a new book these days. And if it does succeed — and understand, that's something I can't guarantee; you do understand, don't you, Howard? But if it does succeed, it will be due to our efforts. And if it does happen that way, the value of foreign publication rights will be magnified tremendously. I think we're entitled to participate in the rewards, don't you? Especially when you consider the risks involved."

I take it all in, and I sigh like a used-car salesman sighs when the customer pokes his finger through a fender, so he has to drop the price another five clams. "I don't know what to tell him that already I haven't. He'll have my scalp, and maybe yours, too. You should see his collection. But..."

And I let him hang there for a minute. Now, as it happens, Timothy Horsefeather was on the phone to me just a couple of days before — called collect, naturally — and, among other things, he told me he was down to his last box of krispy crackers, and the landlord just chuckled when he mentioned the icicles on the radiator. But those aren't things I'm about to tell Max. I take a deep breath and I study the wall, and put it all together in my head.

"Max," says I, "before you'd buy the Taj Mahal, you'd want 'em to put new plumbing in." And I know all the time he thinks the same about me. "Here's the deal. You raise the advance to ten thousand. You trim the foreign rights to thirty percent, and we keep a hundred percent of the cosmic rights. How's it sound?"

"Cosmic rights?"

"If somebody on the moon wants to buy rights, we get it all. Same for Mars, or Jupiter, or ... it's a great big universe out there."

"Really?" Max asks.

I get the feeling Max, too, has

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somebody listening and scrawling notes while we fix the deal, and right now they're rolling on the floor and trying hard not to giggle.

"Sure," Max says. He sounds like he just loves to give things away. "If that's what cosmic rights are, I'd suppose it's all right. So long as it's understood we have a share in all royalties that originate on this planet. Fair enough?"

"Including Tasmania and the Galapagos Islands," I tell him. "Ten thou, and thirty percent, then?"

"Let's make it nine thousand five," Max says. "I'll have to justify this somehow to Mr. Scribbler, Jr., and it would help if I could tell him I talked you down from ..."

"Max," I say, "if you can have the check on my desk by Friday noon, we've got a deal."

"Friday noon?" He sounds terrified.

"My client says he wants it all in silver dollars," I say. "Says he doesn't believe in the folding stuff. I can take care of that detail, but it means I've got to take it to the bank. Can you deliver by then?"

"Why, I ... I don't know," he says. "You know how the post office is, these days. I can try, but..."

"None of this post office stuff," I tell him. "Use a messenger. Send that cute assistant editor you've got. Give her the afternoon off."

"Howard," he says, suddenly chummy and warm because we've actually finally fixed the deal, "you're a big-hearted guy."

"And how does it sound," I go on, "lunch next Tuesday, twelve fifteen? One of my people just brought in a manuscript, and to read it you'd think it was Baldwin. I want to tell you about it. I'll even buy the drinks."

"Tuesday?" he echoes, as if he's writing it on his calendar. "Can you meet me here?"

"Anywhere you say," I tell him, glowing inside.

"And you did say Baldwin, didn't you?" He hesitates. "Uh, is that James, or Faith?"

"Tell you Tuesday," I say, and hang up quick. "Hanson," I inform the empty air.

I discover, when I'm renting a car at the Scranton airport, there's a lot of towns west of Scranton, and approximately two hundred miles worth of Pennsylvania. I tell myself I've come this far. Might as well push it all the way through.

So for the next several hours I drive around mountains, and over mountains, and once or twice under mountains, until I'm seriously wondering how anybody could have got the idea the world is flat. All I've got is a gas station road map, and I've got what I copied off the check the guy sent, which is the

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guy's name and address in a town named North Friendship, and the name of something called the Exotic Transactions Foundation. I'm beginning to think I should have stood home.

Now, North Friendship, it turns out, is one of those places with a big sign at the city limits that says YOU ARE NOW ENTERING NORTH FRIENDSHIP WELCOME and then another sign about five hundred feet farther on that says YOU ARE NOW LEAVING NORTH FRIENDSHIP COME AGAIN. And you twist around and look over your shoulder, and if there's a town anywhere around, it must have run and hid when it saw you coming.

It takes me a while. Then I figure out that what the highway I've been on does is cut through a corner of the town, and all the real part of the burg is off to one side or the other. And when I got looking, sure enough, I find it off down a side road that takes off from the highway outside the city limits, and there's the town with so many old trees that when you stand back away from it, you don't even see the steeple of a church.

But it's still not much of a town. If it was farther south, you'd expect to see all the sharecroppers sitting on the porch with their feet in the dust, reading Erskine Caldwell novels. Houses and a couple of wood-built churches and a school that's made of old brick. A business district that's a post office, a gas station that started out as a livery stable, a grocery store with a Mail Pouch Tobacco sign, and which isn't a supermarket, and a bank. By now it's late afternoon, and the bank's locked up tight as a mausoleum, which incidentally it resembles. Everything looks like it moved in about the same time the last wooly mammoth moved out.

It takes yours truly a while to find Old Settlers' Road, because it's the road I'm already on. And even longer to find the address I'm looking for because every time I get close to where that number ought to fit, there's this big new factory building with a wire fence around it and a sign that tells me it's the EXOTIC PRODUCTS MFG. CO., whatever mfg. means. When I've gone past it three or four times, it finally comes to the temporal lobes, maybe that's the place I'm looking for.

So I whirl up the drive to the front door, where it looks like they've got an office or two, and I walk inside.

It's as fancy in there as an ad agency that's specialized in psychedelic mandolins. I've got to visit these hick towns more often.

"May I help?"

I look at her, there at her little receptionist's desk, and her cute

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little skirt which is all the way up to here, and definitely I've got to visit these hick towns more often. After a while I discover I've still got a voice.

"Mr. Severence in?" I ask. "He works here, doesn't he?"

"I'm sorry," she says, and she sounds like she really means it. "Mr. Severence went to Washington last night, about one of our new products. He should be back tomorrow. You don't have an appointment, did you?" She looks through her datebook. "I don't find any ... I sometimes forget, but ..."

Next to this kid, lambs carry switchblades and bust bricks with their bare hands. I don't have the heart to make with the brass. "Naw. No appointment." I drift back toward the door. "Maybe I'll try back tomorrow. Morning OK?"

"Shall I tell him who...?"

By now, I'm getting my thinking machine plugged in, and I'm still backing off. "Forget it. Like I say, I might not make it. I..."

Then the glass door's flat against my back. I shoulder it open and get away fast.

I drive back into town. Naturally, there's no hotel, although when I look close I notice the grocery store's in a two-story wood building that had HOTEL painted on its side about eighty years and three coats of faded paint ago. For a minute, I just sit there with my hands on the wheel, trying to make up my mind.

It comes to me, now that the grey matter is percolating, this Severence character is connected with two outfits, the Exotic Products Mfg. Co., and the Exotic Transactions Foundation, Inc. And by rigorous logic I figure out the similarity of names might not be an accident. That tells me several things right off.

First, there's more than meets the eye.

Second, there's been a lawyer at work. Probably a smart one, and a smart one usually means expensive.

Third, I've got no business poking around this one-horse metropolis until I know a lot more than I know already.

So I turn the car around and drive up to Elmira. In the morning, Hop, Skip & Jump Airlines flies me back where I came from. I am glad to be home.

Lucy tells me George not only had all three sheets to the wind, his decks were awash and his bilge was bubbling. So she gave the job to Bob, who is now happily finding out what interstate commerce is. She has also shipped George north to Sylvan Acres where, for a fat embellishment, they'll dry him out.

"Who's going to pay for it?" I want to know.

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"We sold Japanese rights on his *Equinox*. Remember?"

"That was a year ago. Two years. He's spent that cash."

"That was the advance. Now they're paying royalties. It's selling like paper fans over there."

That's what I like about the literature business. Everywhere you turn, there's people eager to put money in your hand. But I'm puzzled. Why would an old dog like *Equinox* make a hit over there? This side of the water, I think it sold fifty copies.

Lucy explains it. "They changed the title. Freely translated, now, they're calling it *Cage of Lust.*"

I start to shrug it away. Then I think. "Hey, maybe we can get 'em to put it out again over here. With a title like that..."

But I've got something else on my mind, too. "Get Buster on the wire, there's a good girl."

Buster's a good boy. Don't get me wrong. A better investigative reporter there isn't. Just one trouble. He gets involved in what he's working on. He gets worked up. And he doesn't know when to quit digging and start writing. So he doesn't make deadlines, and sometimes by the time he's got all the facts, somebody's scooped him on the big-splash part of the story.

He's good, but he's limited.

Lucy gets him on the phone. "You working?" I ask, but I know he's not and he admits it.

"Got a job for you." And I tell him what I know, and what I want to know. "Take four days and give me a report. Don't write it like for a magazine or something. All I want's the information."

"Well, I ..."

"I'll pay you per diem, whether you come up with anything or not."

"Well, I..."

"And expenses," I say. "Reasonable expenses, that is."

"Who says what's reasonable?" he wants to know, and I almost bite the mouthpiece off the phone before I remember my manners. "You do. Let conscience be your guide." Later, I decide, I'll discuss with him matters of conscience.

"Got yourself a deal, Howard," he says. "I'll even throw in what's left of today for nothing."

I look at my watch. It's four thirty.

"Except expenses," Buster says. Like I say, Buster is a smart boy.

The days pass like they're punching a time clock. I haggle with a colossus of the film industry — a legend in his own time whose name you'd recognize if I cared to get sued for slander — about a property he wants to make a twenty million fishskin flick out of, but won't cough up a farthing more than a mere ten grand. I negotiate a

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deal for a TV series based on a best-selling novel that hasn't been written yet. I find a publisher desperate enough or dumb enough to not only accept for publication a novel about an alcoholic — by an alcoholic, written under the influence of — but also anxious to compound his foolishness by forcing an advance of six thou into my trembling palm. I practically forget about Buster until I remember I've forgotten about him. I tell Lucy to get him on the phone.

But getting Buster on the phone when he's out on a job is like catching cold with a butterfly net. She tries every hour, day and night, for three and a half days, and then she waits four hours between one try and the next. Of course that gets him, and his voice when I hear it sounds like he's been climbing a mountain the whole time.

"I'm barely started," he says.

"Just tell me what you've found out," says I.

"But I haven't scratched the surface yet, hardly," he protests. Then he rewrites it. "What has come to light so far is only the smallest tip of the iceberg, the thin-veined outcrop of a mother lode, the..."

You see what I mean about Buster? He works hard.

"Such as?" I inquire.

"Well, you know the Miracle Motor? Dingus that came out a couple years ago? Little motors in sealed metal casings, no wires, no batteries, no gas tank? Snap the button and it runs forever?"

"Sure I know 'em. Put the electric toothbrush out of business."

"They come from this Exotic Products outfit. And this Exotic Transactions Foundation has the patent. Federal Trade Commission tried to get after 'em, on account of it was a perpetual-motion machine, and everybody knows you can't make a perpetual-motion machine. Only this Exotic Products, that's what they're making, and it works — up to as big as about half a horsepower — but anybody else picks up a copy of the patent and tries, they can't get it to work at all. And when somebody tries to take one apart, the insides crumble into a handful of grey powder. I've seen it. Looks like something the vacuum cleaner picked up. What do you make of it?"

"Don't have to," I say. "Sounds like they're doing all right by themselves. What you're saying, it's a thriving business and no competition."

"That's not the only thing they're making," Buster says. "They're the ones behind the cube camera, too."

The cube camera I know all about. Got one myself, and I wouldn't begin to figure out how it

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works. You load it, and you take a picture just like any other camera, and out clicks a little cube about the size of one dice. And the cube's a piece of plastic with whatever you took a picture of inside, three D. And there's another gadget you can put the little cube in, and it turns out a cube that's almost a foot square, or whatever size you want, and you can pass the cube from hand to hand or put it on the shelf, or if you'd rather you can put it back in the gadget and bump the button, and it's swallowed back inside. And the really funny part, it even shows the backside of things, like it could see around corners.

"So?" I say.

"The Exotic Transactions Foundation owns the patent on that one, too. And that's another thing nobody else seems able to make."

I'm beginning to get the drift, but I still don't see where it's drifting to. "Any more at home like those?" I ask.

"They've got a whole pile of patents," Buster says. "There's one ... they haven't put it on the market yet. Still talking with the FCC, and it's got a lot of people worried. It's sort of like a telephone, only there's not any wires. You don't even plug it in. It doesn't use radio waves, either. But you punch a number, and it rings up the one with that number, no matter where it is, just so long as you've got its number. Even with radio, if you had as many people using it as they're using phones today, all those conversations'd get in each other's way. This thing doesn't have that problem. Maybe I don't need to say, it's got the phone company sort of bothered."

If I was the phone company, and something like that was coming out, I'd be bothered too. "It got a visual?"

"Three D," Buster says. "Living color."

I decide to call my broker as soon as Buster gets off the line.

He tells me a few more things about Exotic Products. It was started about four years back, and their first product, which was the camera, went on the market just short of three years ago. About two years ago — about the same time they came out with the Miracle Motor — the foundation got set up. And they're both operated by this Philip Severence.

Now Severence, he's a hometown boy that went to Penn State, and then up to MIT for a master's in physical chemistry — which may not sound clean, but it is — and he was starting for a PhD, which is the biggest brass ring an operator in that business can collect this side of the Nobel Prize. But then, all sudden like, he kicks it over, and he's going to Harvard Law and topping it off with a year at the Biz

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Ad school they've got up there. Then he comes home with enough cash in his jeans to put up his factory and go into business.

How'd a college student get that class of cabbage? Sold a patent, naturally. The neon blackboard. Remember it? Looks like the same kind of blackboard they had when I was at Lee Harvey Oswald High School, only it's got a special chalk that you make a mark, it's bright like it was glass with a light behind it — half a dozen colors — even in the dark. And it wipes off neat with a finger, without having to wash your hand afterwards.

Buster hasn't stopped talking, but anyway I start to ask the obvious question — what did this guy do in physical chemistry that comes up with all these things? Then I think better of it, and decide that isn't what I really want to know.

"What about this foundation?" I ask. "What's it up to?"

Aside from collecting more money than you'll see in a lifetime, not much. Two things is all Buster's come up with, and one of those we already knew. It buys the cosmic rights to books and stories — sometimes a play or two — and it hands out cash to college professors. Research grants, it's called.

"What kind of research?" I ask.

Buster doesn't know. He's had a look at some of the paper that's come out, but it's like a foreign language. I have him read a few titles into my ear, and I have to agree they don't sound like anything that'll make the best-seller list. Half the words he even has trouble to pronounce.

"What about these cosmic rights?" I ask. "What's he do with 'em, once they're his?"

That's another thing Buster doesn't know. Like he says, he's not done digging yet, and that's a question he doesn't have a clue about.

I get the feeling, about then, it's time I did some less talk and more think. I tell Buster to leave it off and go home. He says he wants to find out. I tell him he's done great, and he's got me all I can swallow for now. If he's going to keep digging, it's on his own tick, not mine.

"When I've got the whole story, we can sell it, can't we?"

I dunno. "Might," says I. "But right now, can't think a market. What we've got here, we've got something that's a slight peculiar. If you turn up some answers that've got some shape, it's a product we could sell. But right now what you've got is more questions than a lavender Harley Davidson with daffodil trimmings. And I've a hunch you won't get many straight answers. That kind of writing, it's

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hard to find a buyer."

I leave it hang like that and hang up. I've a hunch or two, but I want to look at 'em a while and see what they look like in daylight. And I want to think what I'll do next. That takes a while, because first I've got to find the handle. I'm not as young as I was when I was young.

Eight days it takes. That's when the man himself gives me a buzz, and Lucy puts him through. This time it's cosmic rights to Simon York's old *Stone Pillow*. Are they available?

I know better than ask who else might be bought, but I wish I could. I say I'd have to check through the contracts we've got out on it, but I think that's a piece of the pie we haven't cut yet. Meanwhile, what's the chance this guy sometimes gets to a town where they burn real electricity?

Turns out he visits civilization as much as once or twice a month. So I give him a suggestion, next time why not lunch?

He says sure, why not? He's such a gentleman he doesn't even ask who's buying. That's how much — or maybe I should say how little — they teach up at Harvard Biz Ad.

Turns out he's an average size, grey sort of character. Maybe a little thin. He's got rimless glasses and, youngish as he is — halfway through his thirties, I'd guess — he doesn't have much hair left on top. I lift a martini, and he lifts his and smiles.

"I like to know about the markets I deal with," I tell him.

He looks a trifle confused. "Markets?"

"People that buy," I explain. "Media that use the property."

"Media?"

"Television — you've got television out there in North Friendship? — magazines, books, comic strips. All the ways a literary property's used. There's a lot of ways we slice the baloney."

"I see," he says. I believe him.

"So I'm wondering," I say, "if you'd care to tell me just a little more about what you do with these cosmic rights you're picking up here and there around town."

He looks down at his drink and then up at me. "I think I've told you as much as you need to know." He talks very careful, but I know he hasn't had that much to drink. He's still on his first.

I talk to him for a while. I tell him what I know and what I've guessed. And when you get right down to it, he hasn't been particularly cagey about things. I point it out to him.

More years back than I care to remember, one of my clients did an article for some magazine or other

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about this Project Ozma and some of the things like it that happened later, and about how the taxpayer's cash was wasted on that instead of all the other things it should have been wasted on. Someplace, the idea says, there's people out there in the big universe. And if we know how to listen, and if we listen hard enough, maybe they're trying to get our attention — talk to us. Sort of a nutty idea, but I tell this Severence, because he's been buying what he calls cosmic rights, and because of the funny gadgets he's been coming out with, I figure he must of done what all that government money didn't do.

He lights a cigarette and nods. "The researchers made a typical mistake," he says. "They assumed that because we use electromagnetic radiation to communicate, other people in the universe would also use that means. But when you consider the amount of traffic a universal civilization would need, merely to maintain a minimal level of communication — and that's not even to consider the problems of noise level — it's obvious some other method would have to be found. Not that I approached the question with that idea. In fact, I stumbled over it quite by accident."

Would you believe I get the whole tale out of him? It's like the rabbi that made a hole in one on the Sabbath, and he's finally found a guy he can tell. Seems there's certain kinds of molecules that have an atom or two that vibrate so steady and regular you can hook a clock to 'em, and it's sharper to the mark than anything else in sight. That's what he was tinkering with when he started for that piled high and deep he never went on to collect.

"I found that, while the period was invariant to the limits of measurement, the amplitude seemed to be very irregular — as if the pendulum of a grandfather clock were to swing, say, two seconds of arc on one stroke, and eighteen seconds the next. I was attempting to discover what forces produced that phenomenon."

Those are his words. Half of 'em aren't my vocabulary. It's supposed to mean something. Leaving out most of the details, what he did was put a record of the variations through a computer — analysis, he calls it — and the computer comes back and tells him it's got a pattern like intelligent communication. He doesn't believe it — well, you wouldn't either — and he tries to prove it's wrong by having the computer try making sense out of it. He figures it'll come out with a few thousand pages of garbage, and then he can go back to doing serious work. Instead, what it cranks out amounts to —

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figuratively speaking — a telegram that starts out, "Greetings, Earth people."

Never mind the how of it. Just swallow it — these people at the other end of the line know how to do it, and they're doing it. Don't ask who they are, or where, either. Severence says he doesn't know, and it makes no difference. He gets the impression there's all sorts and kinds of 'em, and he thinks they're spread out a lot of different places, but he's not sure.

Anyhow, and never mind the questions, somewhere in the middle of everything they're saying, there's a set of simple, easy to follow directions how to make a thing you can say hello back to them with. The man puts it together and ... get this, it doesn't just take a message like Western Union, it takes pictures. He sends 'em an ABC book and a kid's book of arithmetic, a page at a time, and then a geometry, and next thing you know they're going back and forth like neighbors over a back fence, or through the wall, for that matter, if you've got an apartment like mine.

Now if you're supposing these people are making this phone call just for the joy of knowing there's somebody home, think again. It's easy enough for 'em — easy enough for Severence, too, once he knows how — but they've got to be getting something out of it, or they wouldn't bother. Right?

It's hardly no time at all before Severence catches on. He gives them something; they give him something back. Pretty soon, it's a brisk business they're doing.

But here's the interesting part. Ever think what we've got we could sell people like that? Toasters? Cadillacs?

In the first place, you can send 'em a picture or a printed page, but there's no way to funnel hardware through. Severence does say they're working on it, but so far they don't have it working. For a while, he keeps 'em happy with the *Mona Lisa* and postcards of Chicago and Yosemite and the pyramids. All the usual stuff. They tell him a process that sticks two chunks of metal together—any two chunks—and they stick tight as a weld until you put this other machine on 'em, and then they come apart clean as a new dollar bill.

But after a while, they get it across to him they're tired of looking at pictures. He sends 'em a few pages out of *Aesop's Fables,* and would you believe? They eat it up. He gives 'em the rest of it, and then before you know it, they've got the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* and all the other books that're supposed to be worth reading even if they didn't make the best-seller list. And it's like they'd just invented reading.

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For all he knows, and for all I know, maybe they just have.

He gives 'em everything. *Le Morte d'Arthur,* I remember him saying, whatever that is. And Dante, and *Don Quixote,* and James Fenimore Cooper. Name it, and he's given 'em a look at it. And he's got a lot of things back.

Understand, it's not always a gadget he gets — something he can make and sell. Sometimes it's just a way to make things — industrial processes, he calls 'em, and he says that's just as important, because without 'em he couldn't maybe make the things to begin with. Sometimes it's not even that — just information about how the universe is put together, and all the things in it. Or mathematics, maybe. Things that might interest you if it's the sort of thing you're interested in. So it's not all gravy, but he gets enough, and he's happy.

It goes on like that for a while, but then they catch on, these things he's giving 'em aren't modern. And they're also starting to develop some taste — won't read just any old thing. They go bananas over Dickens, but when he gives 'em *Paradise Lost,* they give him to understand they don't think Satan's sufficiently motivated. When he puts *Moby Dick* through, they want to know why a character as nutty as that one was allowed to command a ship.

And the part that hurts, when they don't care for a thing, they don't give him anything back. It hasn't got any value to 'em.

Severence tells me that and shakes his head. I tell him forget it. No matter where you're submitting the merchandise, there's got to be an editor at the other end. And no matter how good you think you've got him figured, they'll fool you. Take it from a man in the business.

Something about the way he looks when I say that makes me stop. Doesn't he do any thinking about what kind of thing they want, I ask. Doesn't he try to pick out things they'll like?

He shakes his head. "Should I have?" he wants to know.

I can see he's got a good bit yet to learn about this business, but just then I'm too flabbered to push the question. Or maybe already I'm seeing an angle for me in the setup. I tell him let's have the rest of it.

Well, he says, up to then he'd stood away from sending things that had copyright on 'em. For one thing, he wasn't sure how the law worked for something like this. He'd been to Harvard Law, remember, and mostly what he learned was that he couldn't be sure of anything. I'll tell you right now, I wasn't sure either. Copyright's got more ins and outs than a centipede's shoelaces.

But he sees there isn't a way

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around it. He's got to stop putting it off. So he invents the foundation, mainly because of financial and tax reasons, but also as a blind to work through, and he assigns it all the patents he's got on the gadgets and gimmicks they gave him, and his products company pays it royalties. And when the cosmic people give him the word they're happy with a thing he's sent, out he goes to buy cosmic rights to it, just so there won't be any cause for squawk if it comes out what he's been doing. And the funny thing is, the guy that's sold the rights is laughing about the cash he's got for nothing, and this Severance is sort of chuckling because he's bought it cheap, compared to the cash he can coin from what the cosmic people traded him for it.

Meanwhile, with the rest of all this cash, he's giving it to college professors along with bits and pieces of the other stuff that's come through. And they're going wild in the laboratories, because it's just crammed with science they didn't have any idea of.

Anyway, that's how it is until I come along. He's known there'd come a time somebody like me'd show up and put two or three things together. He's thought about it, and the way he figures it, the thing to do when it comes is tell it straight. He could try fibbing it off for a while, or he could try to slide out from being pinned down, but he thinks all it would get him would be getting called a lair, which doesn't do a man in business much good, and maybe getting in law trouble for fraud or something, or get himself tied up in such a mess of wild-guess games he's be as far ahead coming out with it in the end, anyway.

Besides which, it's not as if he'd lose one little thing by talking straight, on account of now that he's answered their phone, the cosmic people aren't trying to get our attention any more. Anybody else that tries to plug in, all he'll get is a busy signal.

So I'm the one that has it land in his lap, and I listen like a poker player that's just bluffed out three deuces and a trey. It takes him quite a while to wind all the way down, but finally he's done, and I'm thinking this guy's lucky he's got a product to sell that nobody else has, because he's just too honest to be a sharp man of business. Why is it clowns like that get all the luck?

I discover I've still got most of my second martini, a situation which I correct. Looks to me, I tell him, he's not very up on the handling of literary merchandise. Just for starters, all that Greek stuff he gave 'em, unless he had it in the original, he wasn't protected — far as I know, BC Greece never signed

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the Universal Copyright Convention, which hadn't been written yet — but the translation he used probably's got somebody's copyright on it. If the somebody found out, there'd maybe be some trouble.

That's just one thing. For another, there's the way he looked dumb when I talked about picking out things they're probable to buy, instead of dumping them any old thing and hoping for luck. What I tell him, he's got a need for a man that knows the angles and the methods, who can deal and wheel and shuffle the cards so they come out the way you want 'em. And might even know how to pick up the properties for half of what he's been skinned for by assorted parties, myself included. Now if he'll provide me with a list of the things he's submitted, and whatever much he knows about how they reacted...

He's such a dumb businessman we've got the deal made in ten minutes.

So here we are, Tolliver, and because we're old friends even if you did once steal a client from me, I'm offering, on behalf of the Exotic Transactions Foundation, Inc. — with whom I've got a scouting contract — I'm offering the not-to-be-sneezed-at sum of fifteen hundred real live lobster tails for cosmic rights to your man Kitten's — you do call him Kitten, don't you? That's what I thought. I'm offering fifteen hundred for Kitten's *The Burning Spear,* cold cash on the table.

And before you bust a hole in the ceiling, let me point out we've got an exclusive agency deal here; so there's nobody else who's buying these particular rights. And besides, between us we've dug plenty deep through the laws of copyright, and it turns out this is one of those things our billiant and foresighted boys in the nation's capitol didn't think of when they threw the legislation together. It's not covered. So we don't even need to pay you fifteen cents, but we'd rather be honorable about these things and keep everybody happy.

So have we got a deal? Or have we got a deal?

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Maybe the Joe Blotz test will help.

The test is used by honest editors considering stories by famous writers: "What would I think of this if it were a story by somebody I had never heard of, by Joe Blotz?" I think I would give *To Die In Italbar* by Joe Blotz an ecstatic review. "Blotz writes well; he can describe fast action and strong emotions with equal skill; he has a fertile imagination and creates colorful characters. Joe Blotz is clearly one of the most promising new writers to appear in a long time. Perhaps he is too much influenced by Roger Zelazny, but..."

No, it doesn't help. There is no avoiding the shadow; it is impossible to write about late Roger Zelazny without comparing it to early Roger Zelazny.

In 1963 Roger Zelazny published "A Rose for Ecclesiastes"; in 1968 *Lord of Light* won the Hugo. These dates define Zelazny's prime; *sans peur et sans reproche,* he was the darling of science fiction. I remember asserting publicly in 1967 that there was more real science in a page of Zelazny than in the collected works of George O. Smith; at about the same time, Harlan Ellison wrote that Zelazny was the reincarnation of Geoffrey

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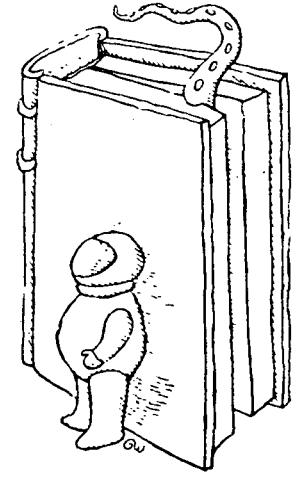
Books

To Die in Italbar, by Roger Zelazny. Doubleday, $4.95.

Protector, by Larry Niven. Ballantine, $1.25.



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Chaucer. I quote these statements as evidence of the spirit of the age rather than of critical acumen; either of them could be translated as "Wow!" with negligible loss of content.

But we were wowing with good reason. In an important sense Zelazny really was without fear and without blame; he would try the most daring tricks, and bring them off. Zelazny's famous skill as a culture-magpie is an outstanding instance: He would cast a computer as both Faust and Adam, mix grail legend with electric psychotherapy, work a line from the *Cantos* into a story whose basic plot was the old pulp chestnut about the white hunter and Miss Richbitch. ("For a Breath I Tarry", "He Who Shapes", "The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth".) Any fool could have tried these things, and, maddened by Zelazny's example*, many did; for a time we had myths like some people have mice. But Zelazny was not his epigones; he made it work.

How did he do it? We can get a clue by looking at one of Zelazny's favorite devices, a rapid shift of viewpoint, or, better yet, shift of values. In the simplest case, this is a shift from a noble view of high heroism to a comic one. An example: In *Lord of Light,* a band of heroes is planning an assault in Heaven. One of them, Tak, has been incarnated for much of the book in the body of an ape. Great deeds are being plotted, and the conversation is in Zelazny's best high-mimetic tone, full of noble vows and Homeric epithets. ("I have always wanted to go to battle at the side of the Binder.") After the strategy meeting, refreshments are served. Tak requests a banana. Blackout. Another: In "...And Call Me Conrad", the Black Beast of Thessaly is about to annihilate Conrad when it is annihilated itself by a bolt from stage left. The bolt has been fired by Conrad's wife Cassandra, whom he had believed to be dead untill this moment. His first words to her are, "Uh —hi, Cassandra. How've you been?" (The editor of the book version (*This Immortal*) changed this line to "Cassandra!" He felt the original text was inappropriate. Indeed it was; that was the point.)

This is an old device. It is a form of internalized comic relief — not the porter in *Macbeth*, but Hamlet in *Hamlet.* It is even an old device in our world; Fritz Leiber has used it systematically since the beginning of his career; *Adept's Gambit* is permeated with it. It is sometimes called irony, but this is

and those of Samuel R. Delany and Cordwainer Smith, who were mining some of the same veins, though with different tools.

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not quite the right word, for the comic vision does not undercut the heroic one, but underlines it. Wit is a better word, if we remember that it is the root of both witty and witting. The double vision is richer than the sum of its parts, because each part illuminates the other.

This method of multiple vision, of playing one aspect of a thing against another, is characteristic of much of the best work of Zelazny's high period. It occurs in more complicated forms than the one I have described. For example, any moderately well-trained English major could write pages on the way Frost is played against Faust in "For a Breath I Tarry." Parts of the story are direct parody; Frost makes Faust funny. This leads to an implicit comparison between Faust's sophistication and Frost's naivete; Faust makes Frost funny. The endings of the stories illuminate each other; Frost succeeds where Faust fails because it is better to seek humanity than divinity. Etc.

Another approach to the same statement: There are worlds in science fiction that stick in your mind; they are solid. Hal Clement's Mesklin, Frank Herbert's Dune, Ursula LeGuin's Winter are very different places in most respects, but they do have this in common. They extend beyond the books that contain them; one feels that there is more to be said. Typically, Zelazny's worlds are not like this. They have no physics, no ecology, no sociology. They are intricately patterned and brightly colored, but they are flat, stage-sets, cartoons. But they do not need to be solid; for Zelazny's purposes, a solid world would be as useless an object as a solid violin. The function of the thing is to resonate.

This is one great advantage of working with multiple visions, of being both witty and witting. It enables the writer to assimilate material that would be too thin, too inappropriate, or simply too silly to handle in any other way. Consider the problem of the Hero. Science Fiction deals frequently with large actions; large actions are done by Heroes, people larger than life, and most readers over the age of fourteen find such mighty doers of great deeds ludicrous. The problem is to keep the man who saves the world from being preposterous. One solution is to humanize him, show him as being sometimes afraid, confused, tired, and wrong-headed. This is the solution favored by a writer like Ursula LeGuin (*The Lathe of Heaven*).

Another solution is to root him firmly in an imagined world, so his heroism is seen as a natural outgrowth of his social and psychological background. This is the solution favored by a writer like

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Samuel Delany (*Nova*).* Zelazny's solution was not to eliminate the preposterousness, but to exploit it. Conrad Nomikos is an immortal man who experiences high adventures and ends up owning Earth. You find this hard to take seriously? So did Zelazny. It's one of the things he plays against in "...And Call Me Conrad," and this play is not only interesting in itself, it makes the heroism more acceptable. Conrad the admirable real hero and Conrad the preposterous comic-book hero define two surfaces; in the space they enclose Zelazny creates his resonances.

(I except from most of this "He Who Shapes" (*The Dream Master*). This marvelous short novel is in many ways a direct contradiction of the main themes and method of Zelazny's early work. A sign: "He Who Shapes" is as full of myth as any Zelazny story of the period, but the myth is here explicitly identified with psychopathology. It occurs to me that this may be meta-wit: Zelazny playing against Zelazny.)

Of course, this is a paradigmatic Zelazny I have been describing, triple-distilled essence of Zelazny, Zelazny as Zelazny-hero, if you want. The real Zelazny was more complicated and requires a lengthier analysis with many more qualifying phrases. Nevertheless, I think I have the essential outlines right; this is how he did it, how he made it work. But this makes what happened in the late sixties very strange. For, about this time, Zelazny abandoned his method but retrained the material that made sense only when coupled with the method. *To Die in Italbar* has flat backgrounds: Italbar itself has the social and economic structure of an American town, for all that it is set on an alien planet and has a few pieces of futuristic machinery and a pet lizard or two stuck here and there in the foreground. It has gigantically larger-than-life protagonists: Two of the main characters have literally god-like powers, another is a highly-successful one-man commando army, fighting an interstellar state from his private fortress, another is a paranoid prostitute redeemed by love,

**In this sense, Delany (another darling of the sixties, and also with good reason) was Zelazny's opposite. Typically, Delany would strive to maintain a single vision, work for solidity, carefully develop detailed scientific, cultural, and psychological background. Even Delany's deliberate homage to Zelazny, "We, In Some Strange Power's Employ, Move in a Rigorous Line," shows the difference; nothing could be less like Zelazny than the meticulous anatomy of Delany's imagined global power network.*

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another is a living dead man. You find this hard to take seriously? So do I, but Zelazny has no qualms: everything in *To Die in Italbar* is viewed straight on, with a single vision, as dead serious as *Children of the Lens.*

I do not know why Zelazny began this process of reverse alchemy five years ago, why he put away his magician's tricks and turned his gold into lead. Maybe he simply ran out of steam; it happens often enough in literary careers; being a genius is a profession for the young. Or it might have been the pressures of the market. Zelazny began free-lancing full time about five years ago, and the economics of sf writing are not such as to allow time for tinkering with the elaborate and delicate machineries of wit. I don't know why; all I know is that we once had something unique and wonderful, and it is gone, and what we have in its place is only a superior writer of preposterous adventures.

Still, I enjoy reading preposterous adventures as much as anyone, and I enjoyed reading *To Die in Italbar,* for it is a superior specimen of the type. It is well written; fast action and strong emotion are described with equal skill; the author has a fertile imagination and creates colorful characters. Pity is wasn't written by Joe Blotz.

Like Rober Zelazny, Larry Niven is a writer with deep literary roots; it's just that we don't notice them so much, because they are so much our own. Niven's stories invoke not Pound, Goethe, and Marlowe, but Arcott, Wade, and Morey; Larry Niven writes astounding stories of super-science, and he writes them very well. In the late thirties, when American science fiction was beginning to establish momentum, there was a feeling that science fiction was getting better, and would continue to get steadily better for a long time. This has held up better than most anticipations of the period; however, something has gone wrong with the details. If you were to go back by time machine to the first World Science Fiction Convention (Frank R. Paul, guest of honor) and present to the thirty-two attendees at the banquet Thomas Disch, say, or Barry Malzberg (winner of the John Campbell Award), and tell them, "This is the superman of the future!" I imagine they would recoil in horror. "Not this," they cry in my fancy. "This is some degenerate mutant, not the true path of evolution!" Larry Niven though, ah, that would be something else; Larry Niven they would understand.

Protector is two long novelettes passing as a novel. The first half of

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the book is Niven's famous story of six years ago, "The Adults." In "The Adults," as you may remember, it was revealed that we are not earth-bred at all, but are in fact the mutated descendants of a failed colonization attempt by an alien race, the Pak. Indeed, we are not only aliens, but neotenic aliens. Our adulthood corresponds to a larval stage of Pak life, the breeder. At a time corresponding to human middle-age, a Pak metamorphoses into a new form; it becomes a protector, sterile, nearly immortal, highly intelligent, driven by genetic programming to protect its young at any cost. We do not undergo a similar metamorphosis because the biochemical trigger for the change, tree-of-life root, does not grow properly on Earth; this is also the reason the original Pak colony failed. "The Adults" dealt with the arrival in the solar system of a Pak spaceship containing tree-of-life; by the end of the story, one man, Jack Brennan, has been changed into the first human protector. He is the Brennan-monster, not human, but not an adult Pak either. The second half of *Protector* is a sequel set two centuries later; it has no characters in common with "The Adults," except Brennan.

"The Adults" has been slightly revised for the book version. Some of the revision has an obvious function — it plants clues developed in the sequel — but much of it is minor rewording.* This is puzzling; either Niven worries more than one would think about small points of style, or someone at *Galaxy* did some heavy editing of the original manuscript.

In any case, either the old or the new version of "The Adults" fits smoothly onto the all-new part of *Protector*. Both halves of the book are permeated with the ingenuity that has been the driving energy of Niven's stories since his earliest work. For Niven, the development of a novel is the development of ideas, much more than it is the exploration of character, or the creation of an imagined world, or even that old pulp standby, the resolution of conflict. The primacy of ideas links Niven to the super-science writers of the thirties, an age when concept was king and *Astounding* would trumpet new stories as "thought variants" or "novas"; the deemphasis of conflict separates him from them. There are no Blackie DuQuesnes in Protector; indeed, there are no human villians at all. Everyone we meet is intelligent, benevolent, and likable; you couldn't ask for a nicer

*E.g., *"There was risk in being the first to meet an alien species," is changed to, "There were risks in being the first to meet an alien species." When I say minor, I mean* minor.

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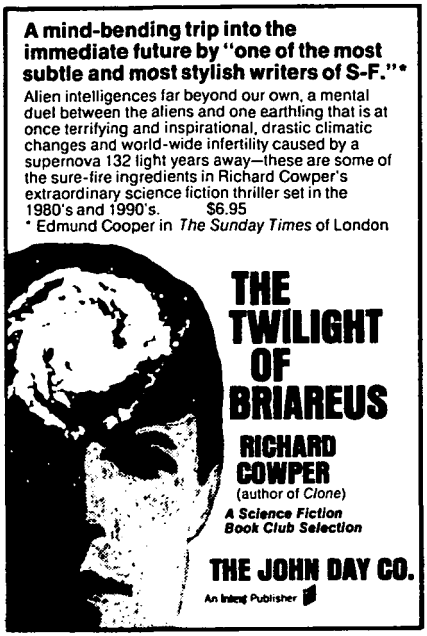
bunch of guys. The Paks are an alien menace of sorts, but they are kept resolutely offstage, except for Phssthpok, the pilot of the Pak ship. And even Phssthpok is handled very unconventionally, by the usual standards of adventure fiction. The defeat of a villian is a big scene in any novel really organized around conflict; Phssthpok's defeat is so underplayed that we don't even see it directly; we just hear Brennan's laconic report of the event.

The deemphasis of detailed world-building separates Niven from the writers with whom he is usually grouped, "hard-science" writers like Poul Anderson or Arthur Clarke. For example, a long section of *Protector* takes place on a wonderland, an artificial planetoid named Kobold. This sort of thing, A Tour of Strange, is part of Anderson's or Clarke's stock in trade; either of them would have shown us, to some extent, how Kobold works, and thus given it verisimilitude. (This is one of the important things hard-science writers use their hard science for.) Niven's treatment is very different; he is interested, not in verisimilitude, but in ingenuity; Kobold is a collection of unexplained marvels. It is exactly what one of Niven's characters facetiously calls it, "a disneyland." (*A Coney Island of the Mind* is a great title that is now wasted on a book of bad poems by Ferlinghetti; it would serve better attached to Niven's collected works.)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* Edmund Cooper in The Sunday Times of London
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Indeed, to find parallels to Niven's work we have to go outside sf altogether, to the locked-room mysteries of John Dickson Carr or the bedroom farces of Georges Feydeau. Here also we have the uninterest in verisimilitude, the deemphasis of conflict, the overwhelming importance of ingenuity. (The great moment comes when we discover that the murderer had no legs, that Clemenceau has been looking through the window.) Writers like Carr and Feydeau are sometimes called mechanical, and I

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suppose the metaphor could be extended to Niven, but when I use it I mean nothing pejorative. The machine I think of is not some ugly device stamping out malformed plastic flowerpots, but some great astronomical clock somewhere North of the Alps. It has sixteen dials on its face and a thousand hand-made moving parts inside, and every year at high noon on Annunication day it rings bells, and a gilded angel comes from behind a door to bow before a gilded Virgin. It may not be the highest form of art, but it's pretty wonderful after its fashion, and I'm glad I live in a world that contains objects like it, and objects like Larry Niven's books.

NEW INDEXES

Science Fiction Book Review Index, Volume 3, 1972, compiled by H. W. Hall. "An annual publication designed to identify and provide bibliographic access to science fiction and fantasy book reviews." Listings by author and title (of reviewed book). Covers all professional sf magazine reviews, some fanzine and general magazine reviews (e.g. *N.Y. Times Book Review, Publishers Weekly*). $1.50 from H. W. Hall, 3608 Meadow Oaks Lane, Bryan, Texas 77801. Photo copies of Volumes 1 (1970) and 2 (1971) available for $3.50 each.

Cumulative Paperback Index, 1939-1959, edited by Robert Reginald and M. R. Burgess. "A bibliographic guide to 14,000 mass-market paperback books of 33 publishers issued under 69 imprints." The index is divided into three sections: a 230 page author index, a 132 page title index, and the publisher specifications section. $24.00 from Gale Research Company, Book Tower, Detroit, Michigan 48226.

ABOUT THE COVER

A meteoroid 2 miles in diameter hits the Pacific at 20 miles per second. Vast atmospheric disturbances and volcanic reactions follow the tremendous explosion of released kinetic energy. An ocean liner, set afire from the heat of the explosion, is poised on the crest of a gigantic wave about 30 miles from the crater rim.

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Dennis Etchison ("The Graveyard Blues," February 1974) returns with a superior story about a man without memories, trapped in a town without memories ...

Drop City

by DENNIS ETCHISON

Bus let man off.

"Hey, uh, wait, I —" He squeezed frame of dark glasses in circle of midfinger and thumb, then patted down nondescript tie strung loosely around open collar, fastened top two buttons of coat, smoothed flaps of pockets. He cleared his throat. "Right." It *seemed* right. "Thanks."

"Take care, pal," said the bus driver.

The man looked around. Hill, narrow road curling up the side; not many trees, dust motes dappling the air. He was reluctant to leave the bus, and afraid to say so. He left his foot on the step-up.

"Up there, is it?"

"You got it."

"Uh."

"Yeah?" The driver clocked his hands around the big wheel.

"Why'd you let me off here?"

"Hey, now. You said the next town, right?"

"Right." He guessed so; he could hardly remember that, even. Something about a highway. Ditch. Crawling up through tumbleweeds. He saw his hands. Cut. Not long ago, either. "Only, it seems like we came close to a couple of other stops before this. Doesn't look like much here."

The driver hit the pneumatic lever. *Hiss.*

"Those weren't the one. I'm not even supposed to stop for them. *At* all." He said it like he would have said 'Move 'em out.' He fixed straight ahead as the door pumped, trying to close.

"Well, thanks anyway," said the man, retrieving his foot. "Wish me luck."

"You got it," said the driver. The door hissed again and sealed, and the long mudspattered steel sides moved out.

The man started up the hill. Well, here goes, he said to himself.

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Near the top, he stood and wiped his face with a handkerchief he found in his jacket pocket. He got a look at the fields opposite: rolling acres of an unknown rust-colored crop in endless unkempt rows. Like wheat covered with dried blood, he thought. He turned. Something had moved nearby in the dry weeds. Then again, again. He raised his face and brimmed his eyes with his hand.

The dim lights of a truck swung around the top of the hill. He realized it was getting dark fast. More gravel careened over the edge and skittered through the grass near him. Listening hard, he heard or thought he heard the motor sputter and die and the ratchety pull of a hand brake. He folded the handkerchief away and started trudging the rest of the way to the top.

When he came up, it was blue twilight. He saw a funny old town on the plateau, lots of trees and tended fields backed up all the way to the shadows under the far hills.

He snorted at the dust in his nose, pulled his hair back behind his ears with his fingers and went to the building with the neon sign. THE MOONMILL, it said. The truck, an old Ford pickup, rested in front. It was the only one of the wooden buildings he could see that had a light on yet.

The door, hewn from heavy planks, thumped behind him. He peered. It was pitch-dark. Music played from a scratchy phonograph record.

green, green, promenade in green

"Hi, hon." A woman's voice. He turned, turned again. "You just get in?" Close, by his shoulder. He felt her take his arm. He made an uncertain step with her, only to bump his knee on something. He made a sound. Reaching out, he felt a stool.

"Well, what have we got here?" said the woman. "Is it a man or a mole? Ha ha ha!" She touched his dark glasses and drew them off. "Well, well! Aren't you a sight! Hurt yourself, hon?"

He slid onto the stool. "I'm all right," he said. Reassuring himself, maybe. Reflexly he touched the knee. The fabric was torn, and he noticed other rips and frays on the suit. He left his hand over the knee.

"Harlan," she called. "A glass of dark for my friend here."

He saw her clearly now, twenty-thirty pounds overweight, not too bad though, bleached hair, cheeks that looked like they held an acorn in each for the winter. And the bar: old wood and black leather, a couple of working men covering beers in the corner, paying no attention. On the wall, under the slatted windows, a fishtank, one of

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those long, slim ones with green crystal paint on the back and a purple light that made the fish shine.

"Here you are, sir."

He swiveled on the stool, almost knocking over the beer at his elbow.

"This here is Harlan," said the woman, "the best barkeep we ever had." At that she laughed again.

"Harlan Shiply," said the small, thin man as he dried a glass. His voice was thin, too, and precise, and one would more likely order a pair of eyeglasses from him, say, or a book on theosophy, than a drink. The thin man put down the glass and extended his hand.

It was the kind of handshake he expected. At the same time the woman placed one of her dimpled hands on his knee.

"My name's Eleanor. This here's my place, you could say. For the time being, anyway."

"Uh," he said, "my name's..." He couldn't think what to say. Frantically he scanned the walls, trying to spot a word, a name. All he could see were beer advertisements. "Miller," he said finally.

"Oh?" inquired the bartender politely. "What line of business are you in, Mr. Miller?"

The woman frowned at him. "Harlan," she said sharply.

"S-sorry," said Shiply, "I forgot." He returned sheepishly to his sparkling glasses.

"To tell you the truth," he blurted, "I'm not in anything at the moment. I'm looking around for a new line, actually. I was in, uh, the retail market before." He caught a glimpse of a sign for Danish beer. "Imported. Importing, I mean."

"No, you weren't, hon," said Eleanor, moving her hand around in a circle on his knee, "but that's all right. It'll worry you at first, but before long — Look at that." She looked at his knee.

"I don't know how it got torn," he said. He put his hand over hers, stopping it. "Well, actually, I was trying to fix my car. Broke down back there on the highway, and —"

"See? It moves around like that, just like it wasn't even attached. That's why they call it a floating kneecap. Ha ha!"

"I guess I should clean up." He lifted his hands from hers but she drew it back, pressing it warmly. "It's been quite a day. Matter of fact, I'm feeling a little dir-oriented."

"Mm-hm."

"Is there someplace, a motel? It's too late to do anything now. About my car."

"Mm-hm. Boland's is right down a block. Don't you worry about a thing."

"Thanks." He stood. He glanced between the two of them, smiled tautly, tipped his head. "I appreciate — "

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"Don't you go off just yet, hon."

One of the men in khakis started the juke box again. The same record boomed out.

green, green, promenade in green

She pushed the wet glass against his knuckles. "Here, now, you need it."

Oh, no, he thought. He reached for his back pocket, hoping. It was empty.

"You're not going to believe this," he began.

They were both looking at him.

"Cheers," said the woman.

He smiled and shrugged. He drank the glass halfway down. It was cold and thick and it tasted like gold.

They were both looking at him.

He reached inside his coat.

She held his hand against his chest. "Don't worry," she said.

"My pleasure, sir," said the man behind the bar.

He felt something firm, drew it out. It was a shiny black breast-pocket wallet. He turned it over. No initials. Inside were several crisp unfolded bills, fives, tens and twenties. He drew out a five absently, searching for a driver's license, a credit card, anything. But there was nothing else. Just two words printed in gold in the leather. He looked closer. 'Pinseal Goathide.'

"You just put that away," she insisted. "You have that money for a purpose, now."

"Thanks," he said. "Thank you very much." He smiled at the bartender. "Mr. — what was it?"

"Shiply. You're quite welcome, Mr., I beg your pardon?"

He put the wallet away. "Forget it," he said. "I'm having a hell of a time remembering my own name right now. Tired, I guess. But what is it they say? 'Sufficient to the day is the, something, thereof?'"

"That's all right," said Eleanor. "You're just like everybody else."

He thought it was a joke, and forced a laugh, and finished his beer.

He walked over to the hotel as the crickets came out. He reversed the ledger and signed 'Mr. Jack Miller', though the desk man — the owner, judging by the size of the place — did not bother to ask. He made up an excuse about luggage, but that didn't seem to make any difference to Boland, if that was his name, one way or another.

"Is there a" (hospital, he started to say) "doctor in town?"

"Thought you'd be asking," said the hotel man.

He got directions, found the office in an unmarked storefront. Doctor Leveland put down the phone and leaned against the doorjamb, drawing on a cigar. He seemed to be expecting someone.

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Inside, the office was surprisingly well-equipped with what appeared to be very new, miniaturized instruments, most of them so new, in fact, that Miller had never seen their like.

At least he thought he hadn't.

"Cigar, Jack?"

He accepted it and a wooden match and stood in the office, shifting his weight and hearing the sounds of what he took to be a television program on the other side of the wall. After a while he had to say something.

"This is a Marsh Wheeling, isn't it? Uh, Dr. Leveland?"

"Make it Roland. Indeed it is. Bite a wee bit more off the tip, why don't you. A real Pittsburgh stogy is what that is, all right. They'll stop making them pretty soon, I hear. But I've got —" He puffed forward proudly and conspiratorially. "—Quite a few cases put away, in there with the refrigerated supplies."

He rocked on his heels.

Just then a series of gunshots cracked loudly. Miller jumped. It was no television set. A backfire? He gazed out the open door but there were no cars in sight.

"Alcazar Theater," said the doctor. "The ass-end of it's flush with my wall, there. Showing another one this week about all those poor cops dying for our sins."

"Look," said Miller irritably. "Aren't you supposed to ask what's wrong with me?"

"What's wrong with you?" asked Dr. Leveland.

That stopped him. He held out his hands, feeling like a damn fool. "I was jacking up my car," he tried. "Do you have anything for a cut?"

The doctor threw back his head and roared. He slapped a hand around the back of Miller's head and led him into the other room. Miller realized that he hadn't been touched like that by a man since he had been a small boy. Wait a minute, he thought, that's something. He tried, but it was no use. He couldn't remember. He howled loudly with the doctor. By the time they got to the examination room his face had twisted up and he was no longer laughing.

The doctor sat him down.

"Listen, now. I know why you came to see me." He was aware of his coat coming off, his sleeves rolling up. "You think you're the only one, don't you." The doctor, if that was what he was, spoke in statements, authoritatively, not patronizingly, and the effect was oddly reassuring. He felt a coolness on his arm, then a needle slipping in. "You think, 'Why did this have to happen to me?' You think, 'What did happen to me?' You don't know yet, do you? Of course not. You feel like you want to cry, but you're man enough not to. It'll

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come to you, though, what to do, how to live, in time. It always does. You understand me? Always."

"Look. Doctor." He opened his eyes. "I'm tired, beat, and—"

"I know."

"And I'm a mess."

"That's right."

"And, God help me, I don't know what the hell's going on!"

"Of course not."

He felt his head tipping back. His eyes closing.

"And you don't remember how you got here, what your name is. They did a real job on you. That's right. They always do. Take it easy for a minute, now. It'll pass. It's just working its way through your bloodstream." He chuckled. "It's sleeping medicine. "I'll help you back over to the hotel. They always need to sleep first off, and the longer the better, I say."

He felt a warmth spreading up through his legs to his groin, where it burned, a big, hot balloon, and on up his chest to his head. "...I must have been fixing my car. It fell on me. Or an accident. Or I was robbed. On the road. You know, hit on the head." If that was true, though, why was he still carrying money? But the ID, that was gone, all of it. "Was that it? You think that's why...?" His head swelled up like an inflating dirigible, and he tumbled backward through open sky, no land in sight. He started counting down his altitude in thousands. "Where am I now?" he asked.

Far away, the doctor chuckled. "Drop City, I call it. That's as good a name as any."

"Doctor," he said, sinking fast. "I...I feel more like I do now...than when I came in."

"That's all right. Tomorrow's a whole new ball game. Or the day after. You'll do just fine here. Glad to have you with us, Mr.—"

He tried to stay up long enough to hear his name.

"—Miller," said the doctor.

He slept for two days. He started out of bed lost; then enough — the town, the bar, the hotel, the doctor — came back to make him pound his forehead in anger, but the drug hangover brought him right back down, suspended in a limbo between righteousness and terror. Feeling like an inmate in a nudist camp of the soul, he took a shower, went downstairs for breakfast.

He bought a razor and a toothbrush.

Days passed. Whenever he found himself explaining his predicament, in the coffee shop, at the general store, he was eased away from the subject with understanding cluckings and almost cheerful misdirection. For some reason he did not understand,

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he did not return to the doctor's office; all he knew was that he did not *want* to. He stopped questioning.

At first he did not believe that there was no police department. "Leveland's takes care of everything," he was told more than once. But when he searched the streets, covering the entirety of the small, self-contained town to its perimeters several times, it was true, all right. Neither was there a bus station. He wondered about that, standing on the ridge overlooking the highway where he had been let out; there was not even a sign to suggest that a bus should stop there. Soon he gave that up, too. If no one else seemed to find anything remarkable about his condition, well, why should he? In a real sense he felt free. After all, how many men are granted a new lease?

The feeling deepened as easily as the taking of a breath, and the days passed just as easily one into another.

First he spent a lot of time in the park lying under trees marked on their trunks with strange eye-like knots. He would wink at them, first one eye, then the other, when the sun fell too low behind the branches, the leaves like burning black coins, their shadows washing over his hands and face. He moved out of Boland's Hotel, found a quiet rooming house on an unmarked lane. He walked and walked, nodding his head and learning to smile again, luxuriating in his new anonymity.

Soon he came to feel that things had always been this way.

One afternoon he found himself at the town's only gas station, drinking a soda and watching the pump ring a dollar's worth of regular into a '47 Studebaker. It was the old glass style pump, like a model of a lighthouse, with the gasoline visible through the sides. There were few cars in use on the streets and he didn't miss them. He felt at ease here, leaning against the soft drink cooler, smelling the sweet dangerous smell from the pump after each slow sale.

"Hi, Earl," he called to the station man. "How's it going?"

"Howyadoing, Jack? Come on out back. I'm workin' on a real crazy one today."

He followed past the tire tub and the collection of old brake linings to a Volkswagen, its dingy red paint long oxidized to the color of a mass of tubifex worms. It was a model from the early fifties, with the small round back seat windows and pinched, slant-eyed rear panes.

"Crazy looking, ain't they? I don't get many."

"You don't? How long you been here, Earl?"

"Long as I can remember. Losing power, he says."

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Miller stooped under the bonnet. The plugs were laid out on a dirty cloth the same color as the automobile, and a caged lightbulb hung over the exposed carburetor. "What's the compression like?"

"Hell, number three valve's down to ninety-five. Looks like she's in for a ring job. Yeah," he mused tiredly, "I'm gonna have to pull the engine on this baby."

"Hmm," said Miller. "You got any diesel fuel around here?"

He took a two-pound coffee can full and poured it slowly through the carburetor with the motor running. Steaming gouts of white smoke billowed up around him. Halfway down the can, he cupped his hand over the intake, felt it suck hungrily for air and die.

"Cut the ignition," he told Earl.

They shared a leisurely break over two more bottles of soda, and then he started her up again, gunned her real good and emptied the can through the bowl.

After that, the compression was up to 120 in number three, and within ten pounds all around.

"Where'd you learn a trick like that?"

"I don't know, Earl. I really don't."

"Well, you must've been a mechanic, sometime or other. Jack, my boy? How would you like yourself a job?"

His money would run out soon, anyway. Besides, he felt at home in the station. The pay wasn't much, but it kept him in the rooming house, and kept his hands busy so that he didn't have time to think. Nights he ambled back through the quiet streets, smelling the roasts for dinner and the figs on the trees and dodging sprinklers that spilled over the cracked sidewalk. He wound up at Eleanor's more often than not. She kept at him, pushing up against his arm in that teasing way of hers, but he held back. There was something, something. Though he couldn't remember what. Though he didn't especially try.

And one night he bought a ticket to the Alcazar, because he liked the slow downcast smile on the girl in the glass booth and the way she looked in her uniform. The same the next weekend, and the next, and after a while he didn't think about what picture was showing, just stepped up and bought his ticket, then waited to talk with her in the lobby when the last show went on and she had to empty the butter machine and lock the candy counter anyway. After a time he guessed she was in love with him or thought she was, and then one particular Saturday, after seeing the show for two nights running, as they walked back to her house as usual, she held his hand very tightly until they got to her corner, when she suddenly drew

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into herself and tried to make believe she was watching the cracks in the cement.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She wouldn't answer at first. Then, "O, Jack." It sounded like all the break went out of her when she said his name this time. "Before I met you, I didn't know anything — and now I'm confused. Are you happy here?"

He stuffed his hands away and counted the cracks with her. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. There's something about you."

He tried to sling his arm around her neck.

"No, really. I knew it the first moment I saw you. The way you used to dress, that suit."

"What about it?"

"It was handmade, for you. And your shoes, and the, I don't know, the way you carried yourself. You're part of something else, something that *can't* figure here. O, don't say anything, I can tell. And if that's true..." She tilted her head from side to side, reasoning. "Then, someday you're going to want to get back to some of the parts, at least, of that other kind of life. It's just too far removed. You can't forget everything. That kind of thing is in your bones."

He pulled her over by one of the eye trees. "That's not necessarily true," he said.

"It's not that I care what you were running away from before you came here. How could I? I don't ever want to know about it. I promised myself never to try to find out. Of course I couldn't, nobody can, anyway, but that's not the point...."

"What do you mean, nobody can?"

"You know. The way it is for all of us."

"No, as a matter of fact, I don't know."

"Dr. Leveland's supposed to explain it to you." She sounded suspicious. "Don't you even know that?"

"I'll ask him," he said, an unnerving feeling taking hold. "I will." Maybe there is something wrong with me, he thought, just going about my business here as if I really do belong, not wanting to know. Maybe I *am* running away.

They came to her house. They passed the tall hedge but, instead of sitting down in the lawn swing, she continued straight to the porch and took her key out of the pocket of her purple and gold uniform. She fumbled long enough for him to catch up with her.

He lifted her chin. "Come and sit with me, for God's sake."

She looked at him painfully. She was pretty, he thought, even like this, her straight, brown, pageboy hair. The light from the

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yellow porch bulb made her skin look like—

He kissed her. Her mouth was warm at first, then unyielding. When he pulled away her eyes were still open.

"Do you love me, Jackie?" she asked.

"Butter," he said. That was it.

"I always smell like butter," she said flatly. "It's my job. I'm sorry I asked."

He stepped off the porch. He touched her elbow gently and she followed in spite of herself, as he knew she would. They sat apart on the swing.

She was right. The sense behind her words reached him. He had lulled himself into ignoring a key question of his existence; he really didn't belong here, and sooner or later his life outside would impinge. He could not hide forever. He had no right to pretend, to allow this girl to go on building a fantasy future for the two of them, one which by all odds had no right to exist. A ringing began in his ears and he suddenly had the overwhelming idea that he had seen all this a dozen times at that movie theater of hers, or on the late show.

"Irene," he said. "How long have you lived here?"

"Why do you ask that?" Her eyes grew steely. "A few years, I guess. Ever since. What difference does it make?"

"Since what?"

"Look at you. Your face," she said dolefully. *"I'm beginning to lose you already, isn't that true?"*

"Wait."

"Well, isn't it? O, why can't you just be happy with what you've been given? Most do, you know, even after we know."

"Know what? You're not making any sense." Nothing was. He felt afraid, now, for the first time since that first night. "I want you to tell me something."

"I can't. Dr. Leveland..."

"The hell with Dr. Leveland! Listen. The others in this town." He had to find out. "How long have they been here? Listen! I know I'm not the only one. They don't remember anything either, do they?" It was all coming in a rush now. "They treat me like it's normal. Well, is it, for them, too? Is that it? Don't *you* remember, either?"

Her head collapsed in her hands.

"Listen to me! Where were you born? What date, what city? Where did you grow up? And your parents, what were they like? Tell me, tell me, damn it!"

"Stop it!" she shrieked. "Stop all your questions! I can't take it! I can't, I just can't!"

He reached out blindly for her, grabbed her to him, a terrible coldness frosting his insides. "Sh, now," he heard himself say as he

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stroked her hair, her neck, her forehead, her face. He kissed her deeply, putting his hand over her breast and keeping it there. "Shh, now, it's all right, I'm sorry, it'll work out, I promise, shh now, shh...."

She threw her arms around him then and in the moonlight, as she cried and cried and would not be stopped, he saw the inside of her arm where the sleeve drew up: something that chilled him to the marrow.

He held to her very tightly, his eyes wide open to the lawn, the street, the town and the unseen and unseeable night.

So he resolved to see Leveland. It was time for answers, big ones to some big questions.

The alarm went off but he didn't need it. He set out, deciding on the way to detour by Earl's and let him know that he would be late. Earl had been decent to him, and he owed him some explanation. He could do that much, at least.

Half a block from the station — he heard a *ding* from the air tube — he noticed a long black limousine pulling slowly away from the pumps.

He crossed kitty-corner, the early morning sun sending its first tingling shock through his skin before it began to warm him.

"Hey, Jud?"

The sunlight blinded him. He lowered his head and bore on across the street.

"Judson! Hey, buddy! Hey, it's me!"

The limousine had drawn up to the curb. The driver was waving.

Judson. For a split second the name seemed to mean something. Then it did not. Is he talking to me?

He approached the car.

"Jud, old boy! I was starting to think I'd never find you! R'lly!"

The driver extended his gloved hand. The grip was firm. A young man, middle twenties. Dry, sun-bleached hair curled surfer-fashion below the edge of the black cap.

"Do I know you?"

"Do you know me, he says! Bro-ther, what a greeting after all this time. Don't you know your old buddy Allen? After all the driving I've done for you?" His straight teeth beamed out of a tan years deep. "Mr. Bledsoe," he said enthusiastically, "hop in. You don't know how glad Mrs. Bledsoe's going to be when she sees you!"

"Just for a minute." He wasn't sure. Something sounded within him, its resonance as yet sub-audible. "I'm on my way to work."

As soon as he got in, the window rolled down and the door locked by remote control and the big car, as distantly responsive as a boat, cruised out from the curb and

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through the streets which now appeared almost too narrow for such a luxury liner to pass. The huge, soft tires cornered with a squeal and before he knew it they were on their way.

Down the hillside and away out of the fields, picking up speed silently. The rows of rust-colored plantings sped by in fanning parallels that would come together one day in infinity.

If only he could be sure.

"I must have been suffering from some kind of amnesia, Allen," he attempted measuredly. That could be it, couldn't it? "Till just now, I guess. When I saw you."

"I figured that, from your eyes." He figured that? Really? "But you can relax now. For sure. Fix yourself a drink." Allen indicated the oversized glove compartment. "Just like old times, huh, eh, Judson?"

Right, right. "Where are you taking me?"

"Home, sir."

Of course.

Allen chucked a cartridge into the tape deck, and they drove the next hour saying very little else.

Wait till I see her, he told himself.

It was as rich as they come. The very private driveway curved around a garden of manicured shrubs and as the limousine ground to an effortless halt, small white quartz stones spitting under the wheels, he stared at it, the whole picture, waiting for it to snap back into some kind of alignment for him.

Foyer.

Hall.

Den.

Lots of wood and leather. Something stirred in him, a half-remembered song.

Footsteps like the knocking of a kid glove. A striking woman, 29 going on 40, a streak bleached into her hair, *tres chic*. She crossed the white carpet, pale arms outstretched.

"Oh, darling!"

A kiss. Almonds. No, egg cream. No, almonds. He flowed with it, tasting, sifting. Her teeth remained together.

He felt the wide band of a custom bra beneath the silk blouse, saw tears dried almost before they appeared, her eyes darting like hybrid tropical fish.

"I can't believe it's really you!"

"I can hardly believe it myself," he heard himself say.

"Al told me where he found you. That horrible place! Oh, what must it have been like for you?"

"It wasn't half bad." Over her shoulder he counted the paintings hanging on the wall, behind the couch. "Nothing like this, of course."

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"Of course not." She hugged him, rocking back and forth. "Only, how did you end up in a place like that?"

"I think I had trouble with the car. Can we sit down?"

"Oh, you must be tired and hungry and, oh, my poor darling! The car, yes, of course. Were you hurt?"

"Scratched up a bit. Maybe I drove into a ditch or something. I can't be sure."

She paced around the Lucite coffee table as he sat. The cushion was as soft as a bagful of kittens. "Yes, it burned, didn't it?" She eyed him peculiarly. "Why didn't you ever try to get in touch with us, to come home?"

"I didn't seem to have any ID on me."

"Yes, of course, they found your papers, and some brass buttons, I think it was, and, oh, bits and pieces. They told me you'd been burned alive!"

"Irene, I don't remember any of it. In fact—"

"*Linda*, darling. I know. Of course you don't. You couldn't. I mean..." She tapped her lower lip with a lacquered nail the color of a cut artery, then folded the lip under her teeth and bit at it. "Of course you couldn't be expected to remember anything. How could you?"

He wasn't sure he grasped what she was telling him. He was waiting for a message inside, and it hadn't come yet. "I want you to show me a picture of myself." She should be able to do that. "I mean, it might help me remember. Do you think so Linda?"

She fidgeted, watching the hall.

"There's no time, darling. You're back now and you need a shower and some clothes and..."

He propped his feet on the coffee table. It was his, wasn't it? "I'm fine. Just let me sit here and take it all in."

She looked at him distractedly, as if she could only be satisfied at this moment by his following her lead. Perhaps she needs that, to stay ahead of whatever it is she's really feeling. Okay, I'll let her call the shots for now, he thought. He didn't want to blow all *this*. He'd pick it up, learn the ropes soon enough.

As soon as it all came back to him.

"You know," he offered, trying to make a joke, "a man could really get to like it here."

"Darling." She advanced, the walls so white behind her, light filtering through the gauzy drapes. He remembered something like that. "There'll be time later. You've been through..."

Such an ordeal, he finished for her. The whole thing was off-center somehow. She leaned

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over him, her hands like forceps on his shoulders. He smelled avocado oil in her hothouse skin. Cleavage hung dark below one breast through the vee in her blouse. She wet her lips, her tongue a small pink ferret. He felt an urge to throw her down between table and couch, her white flesh spilling out of her silk, spread her open right then and there under him so that he might know who and what she was.

He rose, one hand on her neckbone, now the other. She looked like a painted alabaster idiot, he decided. About to break under his scarred, sunburned hands.

"Judson..."

"Don't say any more." She expected too much. She had no right.

His hands traced the tendons of her moving throat.

"Darling," she whispered, her voice swishing like nylons, "you're hurting me."

He lowered his hands.

He allowed her to lead him down the hall. He saw a bedroom, neat as a hospital ward.

"Later, darling. It's been so long. *Hasn't it?*"

"Wait," he said. "Are my clothes in the closet, there?" He started into the room. "If they are, I'd like to have a look."

She stepped in front of him. "*No.* I mean, I burned all your things, right after we heard about the accident. I couldn't bear to see them any more."

"Then whose clothes are they?" Another man's? Well, he thought bemusedly, maybe she isn't so glad to see me walk back into her life just now, after all.

"Allen's," she said hurriedly. "This is his room now. In fact, while you're in the tub, why don't I pick out something of his that suits you, and then..."

"What if it doesn't fit?"

"Oh, but it will, darling. You and he are the same size."

"I didn't remember," he said.

"That's all right." She led him to tiles and heat lamps and plush towels. They were monogrammed JB. That detail reassured him, though only slightly. "No one expects you to."

After dinner she prescribed a drink. "Scotch or Jack Daniels, darling?"

"Don't you remember?" he asked.

She fawned over him and moused with him and handled the cord on his robe. He found her attractive in an angular, disciplined way, and her fixed, controlled expression became less noticeable as the firelight waned. In the morning he would remember Allen coming into the room, her cool fingers removing the glass from his

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hands and the words "the drink," perhaps from his own lips. She woke him, or rather what sounded like a loud slam in another part of the house woke him, and she strung back the drapes in the bedroom and set him up for his breakfast tray.

"Allen," he struggled to say, head throbbing, "was he...?"

"I've sent Allen on an errand. He'll be back with the El Dorado in a few minutes. I know what, darling. Why don't you stop by Westward Dynamics this morning?" A rat-shrewd light came into her eyes. "You might find a nice surprise waiting for you. Your office hasn't been touched, you know. I've seen to it."

Had she really? Had no one taken his place, then, even after so long?

"Seeing it again might have a tonic effect," she persisted. "You might even find that you re—"

His mouth was asbestos and his head felt as it had the morning after the night before the night before, that time at Leveland's.

"Linda. Don't push me."

She was watching the driveway below. Satisfied, she returned her attention to him. She was wearing a thin dressing gown. It creased familiarly down her body, clinging in a breathing vertical fold at her abdomen.

"First I've got to find a doctor," he announced. "Get me my clothes."

Hearing that, she appeared relieved, oddly enough. She lifted imperceptibly to another level.

"Why not?" She murmured.

"What?"

She trailed to the bed, where the edge of the mattress sealed the gown to her thighs like a second skin. "We'll have to hurry. Allen will be back with the car soon." She met his eyes, calculating something. Then, with mechanical decisiveness, she touched the ribbon straps at her shoulders. A moment later she lifted the sheet.

The car navigated the suburb, skirting the city. The distant layered din of freeways oppressed the roof of the car, the subsonic pressure of an avalanche building to smother him. Encapsulated in the oversized sedan, he felt shrunken to the size of a child. Uneasily he touched the great seat next to him. An envelope, by the unused safety belt; he undid the flap with one hand and withdrew the contents, riffled the edges. A stack of bills. It felt like all the money a man would ever need. Allen's? Not bloody likely. Perhaps she had placed it in the car when she opened the door for him. He recalled Allen standing there, his tie wrinkled, his face beaded, his eyes swimming with perspiration.

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What kind of errand had she sent him on? She had pothered the door shut after him, almost eager to see him on his way. She did not kiss him. She smiled with a model's efficiency as he drove away past the eucalyptus trees, but when he glanced back, adjusting the mirror, her face was set and waxen. Like Allen's.

Maybe they're more concerned about me than I thought.

He wheeled with mounting impatience through street after identical street, not realizing for several miles that he had forgotten to get directions. The hell with it, he thought. He would find an intersection, a sign, a way. He would get his bearings and make it one way or another now. He thought that.

He drove past a discount store, a supermarket, a mindlessly milling shopping center. The people appeared speeded up as if in a silent film. Children like deranged rabbits scattered before the wheels.

And so on and on, block after patternless block.

My God, he thought, what have I come back to.?

Impulsively he wrenched the wheel, changing course. He could still make it to the freeway, watch for yesterday's landmarks.

Traffic lights, staggered in an obstacle course, batted their hooded eyes with furious indifference. He spotted an opening in the cheap circus boulevard. The freeway sign was familiar. He aimed for the on-ramp.

A woman with a pilfered shopping cart, her view blocked by the overstuffed brown bags she bussed, clacked across the pedestrian walk on the other side of his tinted windshield, her face pale as cancer.

He accelerated, shutting her out.

Brakes screamed on all sides and horns like deep-throated trumpets. He had a brief, shuddering flash of what it would mean to die here, struck like a dog and run over again and again by countless unknown assassins.

Now he heard the piercing wail of a siren, trying to lure him aground in this trashed sector.

Not on my life.

A gas station loomed ahead. He gunned the engine and the car swerved and dipped and lurched to a halt.

He slammed the steering wheel with his fists.

A boy with a rag in his pocket marched to the window and mouthed, "Fill 'er up, sir?"

Unable to make out the boy's words through the glass, he nodded him away.

A police car bumped over the curb and eased into the station.

He started the engine again.

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In the police car, the officer covered his mouth with a coiled-cord microphone.

A pounding, so close it seemed to be in his head. Twisting to his left, he saw the boy knuckling the glass.

He hit a button and the window rolled down.

The boy hooked a thumb toward a sign. NO SMOKING TURN OFF YOUR ENGINE.

He glanced back and saw the pump hosed into his tank.

He cut the ignition.

He did not notice a second squad car enter the station.

He leaned into the headrest and squeezed his eyes shut until shards of light fired on the inner surfaces of his lids. When he opened them again, the boy was cleaning the windshield with a wad of blue paper toweling. At the end of one wiper blade, an old parking lot receipt clung stubbornly to the glass. LAX, it read. The boy respectfully avoided it, as if the cardboard tag were a permit of great importance.

He heard the hose jump. The boy polished off the window and circled to the rear to retract the nozzle.

"Cash or charge?"

He unpacketed one of the bills and handed it over.

"Do you know your transmission's leaking, sir?"

No, but if you hum a few bars I'll fake it. "Get me a map, will you?" he snapped.

"Sure. Lemme get your change. She's throwin' oil pretty bad. Eh, you don't have anything smaller, do you, sir?"

He glared back.

His eyes followed the boy to the office. The boy took a key from his belt and hunkered over a cash box.

A policeman entered the office.

It had been so long since he had seen a cop — how long? — that the siren and the quick black-and-white wolverine at his tail had jarred him and he had overreacted, detoured into the station. Apparently, though, he was not the target. However, the boy now glanced back curiously at the limousine, as the uniform quietly vied for his attention.

So what? he asked himself. If he's going to write me up, let him, and let's get it over with.

He pushed out of the car and headed to the office.

The uniform met him, a reflexive hand at his side.

"You give him this fifty?"

"It wasn't a tip." To the boy: "I'd like my change." He picked through the white, blue and red road maps.

"In a hurry, are you?"

He eyeballed the cop.

"That your ve-hicle?"

"Yes. If you don't mind —"

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He followed their focus to the limousine. Eight or nine police had materialized while his back was turned and were in the process of turning it inside out. He watched blankly as three more squad cars arrived, joining the four already there.

A hand between the shoulder blades.

"Put-your-hands-on-the-door-spread-your-legs-don't-move."

"What do I do with this?" asked the boy, waving the bill.

"Evidence, son."

Damning evidence, by the sound of it. But of what?

Searched, frog-marched to the car. Uniforms swarming, black shoes and white hands and short-wave radios groaning static against the grinding traffic.

"Money's there, all right." Envelope, proffered pincer-like, for Top Cop's inspection.

"Hold on, my wife gave—"

Fugitive fifty bagged with the rest. "Mister, this money was reported stolen less than an hour ago." Smirk. "Now what do you say to that?"

"License plates check out, sir. Bledsoe, Judson Stephen. 3729 Arroyo Glen. This is the car."

"Of course it checks out. If you'll take a minute to call my wife—"

"What's your name, fella?"

"Uh, Judson. Bledsoe." Painstakingly enunciated; his jaw felt wired. "What's it supposed to be?" A not-at-all insincere question, that one.

"You tell me, fella. You tell me."

"Look. This is my Cadillac. I am on my way to my office at—" What was it? "—Westward Dynamics. Check it out. Go ahead. If you'll just let me sign your goddamned ticket—"

Snickers, waggling heads, sounds like the wheezing of disappointed schoolmasters. "It never fails to amaze me, you know? In broad daylight. You would have had better luck trying to get away with stiffing a liquor store. Don't you guys ever get it? All right, you're under arrest. Just a minute and somebody will read you your rights."

"What charge, for Christ's sake?"

"You want to watch your mouth, little man. How about grand theft auto, breaking and entering, two counts of kidnap, let's see, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon. Attempted rape. How's that grab you, smart guy?"

"Attempted *what*?"

"We'll think up some more, don't you worry." Clipped, close-mouthed, orders to a stick, an object, a spot on the sidewalk.

"I don't get it."

"We don't have to tell you

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anything yet, you got that?" Then, taken in by dumbfounded life mask but probably not, probably more out of a long-suppressed yearning to swing weight behind such words: "The lady notified us an hour ago. The story seems—" What panache on that word! "—Seems to be that you flagged down the lady's chauffeur in one of those halfway settlements, forced him to drive over the county line, that you proceeded to hold them both at gunpoint—" Again, a liquid familiarity with such a word. "—At her residence until this morning, when Mr. Bledsoe arrived home from a business trip, at which time you took him hostage and fled the premises with over ten thousand dollars in cash. And the car. Let's have a look at that coat."

Lapels flailed as if by a professional pickpocket.

Monogrammed.

JB.

"These are his clothes."

You have such a way with words, officer. And that about wraps it up. Mark it and strike it. Move 'em out.

"Just one more thing."

Yes? Yes?

"What did you do with your hostage?"

Dum-da-dum-dum.

He broke and lunged at the car for proof, papers, ID, a picture, something, anything with which to identify himself. The glove box rattled open.

In the gaping shadow, a revolver.

Struggle in handcuffs. Jerk and strain at your back, raging until the blood bursts like drums in your ears over the traffic and the crackling radios.

"Sergeant, you want to take a look at this."

Bent knees, tops of caps. Trail of oil oozing from the car. Dark oil, spreading in a pool under the trunk.

"Yeah," volunteered the boy, "his transmission's throwin' oil like a sieve."

The sergeant knelt, dipped a finger, smelled. "This isn't oil, son." Dramatically. "Get that trunk open."

The trunk yawned.

Luggage, flight-tagged.

Shoe.

Foot.

Leg.

Body, contorted like an uncooked pretzel in a gray suit. Dead, of course.

Of course.

Blood from single bullet wound trickled from death mask skull, still congealing, to asphalt.

Cop: "Well, shit." Crowded like actors silenced by an unexpected entrance, huddling for a next line. "All I can say," says one of the cops, "is I sure hope his old lady

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had plenty of life insurance on him."

Get it. Get it now, almost all of it, enough, enough. Too much. How they must have planned the murder, searching for someone, the only kind of fall guy who would, who *could* play along with them; at last, realizing in a cold flash the only place they could hope to find such a one. And Allen had even picked someone the right size. They were good. Oh, were they good! "You're goddamned right! How right you are! Don't *you* guys get it? You can bet your asses she had plenty riding on this! Oh ho, the plan of the cen-tu-ry!" You laugh maniacally, a man who has been handled and knows it at last, set up only to be flattened again, a moment of clarity, until a club at your throat takes you out.

On the blacktop, blood melting and coagulating with spilled gasoline and motor oil, a shimmering rainbow beginning and ending in its swirling depths.

The trial: hired flagellants relive your crimes in the courtroom, pick them over as meticulously as worms spawned within the dead. (You didn't do it, the Pentothal sessions in the Medical Center prison ward prove it; such evidence is inadmissible, of course.) The defense: doctors hover, mercenary angels in metallic suits and half boots, in conference with wire-sideburned lawyers. (The Clinic pays for them all with impotent, reluctant, constipated dedication; bad publicity, a guilty verdict could, just might, will scare potential customers.) The back story: (There was no back story until the moment you sprang up like a ripe dragon's tooth in the road, the five hundred survival dollars in fives, tens and twenties provided in a shiny new wallet; there never is.) Like any other voluntary, emphasize voluntary customer, patient at NeuAnfang Clinic, you paid, in advance, naturally, to have your memory selectively "cleared" — read: a sequence of protein injections, primarily puromycin and 8-azaguanine, into the cerebral cortex. (The cost: a basic 33 thousand dollars, more or less depending on the stipulations in each personalized contract.) You were then shoved gently, professionally out the door, pointed quite fail-safely down the only road, along which the rehabilitation communities, halfway settlements like Drop City, are sown every few miles across the floor of the isolated valley; no through traffic, no campers allowed, only an occasional bus to and from the Clinic like the one on which you hitched a ride (had you stepped off the road, stumbled, fallen, panicked, waved him

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down?) free again to take your chances on the neurological pathway (no forks other than those you make yourself.) The verdict: the Clinic must take no chances. Guilty or not, you are pled mentally imcompetent to stand trial.

"You would have come to see it for what it was, by the way, sooner or later anyway, Jack. (Do you want to keep that name?) Nobody gets it right off. I don't know who discovered water, but it wasn't a fish. The answers come in their own time, and not until the questions start to pop up on their own. After all, questions come out of some kind of order in words, and the answers, I guess, have to come out of the order of your life. You wouldn't, you couldn't come looking for me until you'd already found me, in a sense. Too much in the beginning only keeps a client confused, so he starts to fall back on the great mother Clinic and all us witch doctors. You didn't pay your money to get turned into an invalid. A new chance is what you wanted. We try to see to it that you make one for yourself. The way *you* want it.

"We're supposed to keep you under observation for ninety days. Then the court will be wanting a report on your, let's say sanity. Hah! 'Course there's nothing wrong with you now. But who'd believe it? We've had too much bad press to convince a jury that people like you come for the treatment for any reason except to hide something. Your record's clear — you weren't wanted for anything or we couldn't have taken you — but try to explain that, try to convince 'em on the stand. Every doctor on our staff could talk till he's blue in the face and it wouldn't make much difference. Far as they'd be concerned, you were running from something or other — you had to be, see? — even if the law hadn't got wind of it yet. It would have, they'd think. They don't believe in innocence, Jack. They can't.

"Now, your observation can be handled in different ways. That much is left pretty much up to us, under the law. But I'll tell you something, Jack. We feel a responsibility to our clients. Yes. As much protection as the law allows, and then some; that's not altruism; it's just good business. You came over to us because you woke up one day and found you'd got turned around into something you couldn't live with any more, a kind of person that sickness of theirs had made into a thing that only knows how to get in its own way.

"You go on, sleep, Jack. It's dark out. I'll be giving you a few more of these injections, and then you can give it another try. That's one detail they didn't specifically prohibit us from doing for you."

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"No." You try to raise your head but the light is everywhere, so you can't even see Dr. Leveland. "No more injections. "I —" You are struggling to make a decision, one that seems all of a sudden to be the most important you've ever made, more important even than the first one. "I already had one new deal. Nobody," you realize, startled at yourself, "promised me anything when I came along the first time, the very first time, I mean. I — think I'd like to play this one out to the end."

You are very sensitive to the pressure of the bed supporting you, the sound of wheeled appliances carting along the halls outside the door; so many, each going as silently as possible through his appointed rounds. You hear the soft ringing of an elevator in the hospital, a sound you seem to know, people coming and going within its confines, and if stretching face muscles, the 13 steps of a grin can be heard by your human ear, then you hear that, too, there in the room close to you.

"You're going back to a place where there's just no model for the kind of behavior I was talking about. What you do after that is up to you. I can tell you, though — I guess you expect me to — that a certain young lady was knocked down a few notches when you left. Far as I know she's still waiting."

"Roland." Your mind is an electromagnet and you feel the energy spiraling outward from a core you weren't sure you possessed until this moment. "What about the ninety days?"

"Well, they'll want a diagnosis at that time, from me, I guess, since I'm the acting physician in town. I'll hook you up to all the mumbo jumbo and they'll get a print-out back here at the Clinic. But hell, how can *I* diagnose you? I open my mouth to tell you it's raining, and in the middle of the sentence the sun comes out!"

You're planning already, how to find a way to get at the truth about Linda Bledsoe and that son of a bitch Allen, how he worked it getting into the valley past the detours, just to pick up someone like you to take the rap, someone whose word, they knew, would have a value approaching absolute zero in the eyes of the law. There must be a way. Ninety days isn't going to be much time.

"Now," says Roland, "don't go too fast right off. I know you're brave enough to be scared, but you might still be a little too humble to win."

You look up. His face is completely washed out by the brightness of the light.

"On the other hand, Jack, old boy, you don't want to use Drop City to hide out. Now why did I

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bother to say that? I think you already know, or I wouldn't be taking a chance on you."

You make a questioning sound in your dry throat.

"Just what you already know, Jack. That a place a man can hide in can be something else, too, when he needs it. *It can be a haven.*"

But his voice fades. His voice fades and you are already there, coming up over the reeds and sage into a wine sky, stopping on the edge where nobody ever gets off to wipe your face with your own good handkerchief before turning into it once more. Hear his words, circle his office and begin again, you are circling the town, the lights coming on over the movie marquee, it is one you have seen before but never stayed through to the end but there is no rush, it will be there tomorrow night and the night after; you are relieved that she is not yet there on her stool behind the glass, doling out tickets like brightly colored lies, ones which those who choose to enter will be happy to live by, as you cross the empty street to the bright blue sign misting in the haze of a warm day turning slowly toward evening. Inside, to the right, the fish still thriving under glass, to the left, the old dark wood and leather crescent railing, and moving somewhere in front of the juke box that looks like nothing so much as an overstuffed chair sprung through with lights, a woman dances with herself, a coin ready for one more in an endless succession of plays, twenty-thirty pounds overweight and ready for the winter, fingers wet with beer. The door thumps securely behind you as you go to the bar and order the first in a series of very stiff drinks, and when Eleanor comes over you turn your back not unkindly on Mr. Shiply, the barkeep who is nothing of the kind but who has found a way of being that suits him well enough for the present, as he says, "Well hello there, Mr., what was it?" But he is too late, Eleanor is against you and your feet are moving already to a music that seems to be playing just for you.

green, green, promenade in green

And you will not sleep in the hotel this night and you will not sleep in the boarding house, it is still too soon, it is time to lose yourself in order to come back to where you began, and as you take her arm in the dance you remember another arm, the uniform sleeve drawn up: old, almost healed, the knots of hematomas and the scar tissue where a hardening had been surgically removed, years ago, in another life long past, and mercifully so, mercifully forgotten, a life which you saw then and understand now had been tracked relentlessly by endless hypodermic

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needles....But it is too soon to think of that now, too soon.

tell me who you love,
tell me who you love

You do not try to speak to this woman of any of it. It is something too sharp and too wild. For you cannot, you know, use words to get beyond words.

COMING SOON

Next month: "The Rescuers" by Ted Thomas, suspenseful sf about an expedition to Jupiter. Plus short stories by Michael Bishop, Robert F. Young and others.

October: 25th ANNIVERSARY ALL STAR ISSUE. This is the big one: 48 extra pages. New novelets from R. BRETNOR (Papa Schimmelhorn returns!) JACK VANCE and GORDON DICKSON. New short stories by ISAAC ASIMOV, POUL ANDERSON, FREDERIK POHL & C. M. KORNBLUTH, PHILIP K. DICK, POUL ANDERSON, JUDITH MERRIL. And that lineup is incomplete! We'll have a complete table of contents for you next month, but this is one issue you will not want to miss. Use the coupon on page 160.

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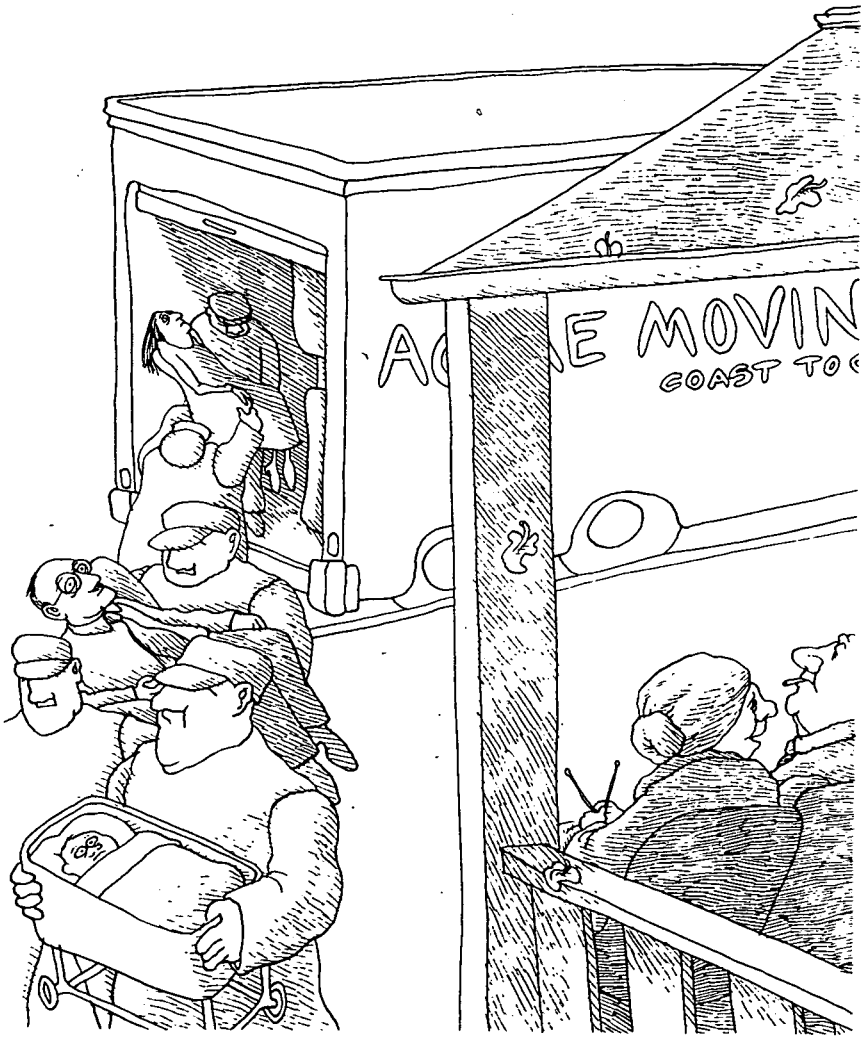
Graham Wilson



"Look like nice folks —"

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Andrew Ward was born in Chicago in 1946 and was raised in India and Greenwich, Connecticut. After attending, with mixed success, Oberlin College and the Rhode Island School of Design, he returned to India to work as a photographer for Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Ford Foundation. Since his return to the U.S., he has written the text for a book of his photographs of an Indian village and has had three short stories in *Audience* magazine.

The Has-Been

by ANDREW WARD

When he began to have his doubts, he would get up and stand by his bed in his dim curtained-off apartment. Quietly, so as not to awaken Mr. Peevy, the night watchman resident of the adjoining apartment, he would say "Vroom," and wait, his fists and jaw clenched, for the surge of flight to envelope him. But even as he felt himself lift from the floor, his doubts persisted, and he decided to remain airborne for the rest of the morning, to be on the safe side. So he hovered around his apartment, eating pop-up waffles, drinking instant coffee, watching women-only morning talk shows.

Since his divorce, his flying had become increasingly petty and aimless. He flew out for small things, not bothering to change into costume, and bought a lot of gadgets at hardware stores, chatting with the salesmen, deploring rising tool prices. His powers were constant, they had told him, but somehow, despite all assurances, he did not seem to have his old pep any more. Buildings had grown higher than when he had first been given his billing, and unwilling to risk failure, he had not attempted any single-bound leaps. He had limited tests of power to holding up already unreliable commuter lines. He was faster than some arrows.

Even at their height, his powers were rarely applicable to the crises which faced the citizenry: transit strikes, skyjackings, ghetto riots, credibility gaps, spur - of - the - moment, out-of-nowhere assassinations. The factionalism which these crises evidenced only complicated his role as deliverer; and, on another level, there were the complexities and exigencies of

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modern tastes, tastes which could kaleidoscope overnight, leaving him miles behind, out of breath, bewildered, poking into once-familiar territory to find he was no longer wanted, or even recognized. How often had he X-rayed what looked to be crises in high-rise apartments — a clear-cut rape scene, say — only to barge in and discover that he had chanced upon an orderly — tame, really — gathering of bondage enthusiasts exercising their constitutional rights. In time, through such ill-chosen interventions, he eventually alienated a vast contingency in the city, reducing himself to faded celebrity status of the Joe Franklin's Memory Lane level, so cautious in his choices as to which crisis to take on as to all but paralyze himself and his powers.

He was not entirely blameless in terms of his decline, for there was about him, as there always was, a certain air of smug self-righteousness at key moments in crisis situations. He had a tendency to moralize at awkward moments: oversimplifying increasingly complex situations and coming up with ultrapatriotic one-liners. Once, stunned by the ins and outs of an emergency involving Japanese skyjackers risking the lives of Puerto Rican tourists on a British airliner in the name of Arab nationalism, he stood stammering in center aisle, deflecting bullets, trying to come up with something tidy, to draw a lesson from it all, unknowingly directing two bullets through the hearts of homeward-bound small-parts executives on their way back from a Tel Aviv industrial exposition.

Had his paper not folded after a crippling stereotypist job action and had the New Journalism, which required powers alien to his own, not begun to dominate the remaining papers in the city, he might have withdrawn from his role as superpower completely and lost himself in the work of his mortal guise. But he had abandoned that identity entirely, revealing his true, all-powerful self to his bride on their wedding night, only then to learn that what he had been saving for the sanctity of wedded bliss could not hold a candle to his other capacities. Unwilling, on moral grounds, to resort to ground-breaking foreplay techniques which might have improved his rushed and matter-of-fact connubial performances, he eventually lost his bride to a Berlitz instructor named Kirkabus, sweating out the legalities of this stunning loss in a hot press-ridden Mexican divorce court, "incompatibility" the key term of the proceedings.

Speechless with girls on the phone, dumfounded at singles gatherings, he withdrew completely

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into his apartment, furnished as it still was by his ex-wife in a combination hacienda and antique Byzantine motif. For a time, he turned from one eastern meditative technique to another, plagued with skepticism but desperate for solace in whatever form it could take. But he found that by taking the lotus position and concentrating hard on not concentrating hard his being became so awash with confused frustration that he would literally burn a hole in his hardwood flooring. More physical approaches, such as Yoga, he found useless, because he could do the exercises with such ease that no contortion could alter his normal flow of thought. He could, for instance, stand on his head for hours, attempting to concentrate on nothingness, and eventually find himself thinking about 6:00 news teams, Saran Wrap, the dry look: the same things that would have come into his head if it had been right side up.

Abandoning such approaches, he entered into a thoroughly bleak period during which he watched West German midnight movies, recycled his unlaundered underwear, ate canned ravioli, his apartment a cluttered nightmare of despond and neglect. Agents from minor network afternoon talk shows called occasionally, and a bill collector named Burky who refused to admit to a computer error on a department store billing called incessantly, disguising his voice, impersonating Internal Revenue agents, relatives, and private detectives. The only variable in Burky's impersonations, however, was the degree of nasality in his voice, so that anyone capable of making a qualitative judgment could recognize the bill collector's voice immediately.

"This is your Uncle Turner," Burky lied in a medium-nasal voice, hopeful that family pressure, even contrived family pressure, on this bill business would beat down all defenses and his foe would contritely pay at long last the bill for the hideaway posturepedic which the computer insisted he owed.

Since this was one of the few assertions any external force had made in his life for some time, he, in a cloud of doubt, latched onto this challenge to his faded powers as a test, however pitiful in proportion to past tests, of his virtues, powers, and credit rating which was central to his present circumstance.

"Word's gotten all the way to us," said Burky, his nasalities varying now, about this bill business, boy. We just don't like the sound of any of this."

"Look, Mr. Burky —"

"I'm your Uncle Turner. I'm

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one of your credit references. You remember me. Now, on this bill matter, nephew," Burky went on, "we just hope you'll settle this thing pronto."

"Mr. Burky, do we have to go through all this again?"

"Your aunt and I are terribly upset that you'd let something like this slip."

"Mr. Burky, I've told you time and time again. This is a mistake. I don't owe that money. I don't have a hideaway posturepedic."

"Well," Burky said, his nasality dropping off completely. "There's no talking to him."

Mr. Burky had chosen poorly from his list of credit references. Surely one of the others of that strange amalgam of adoptive relatives would have been more likely to call about billings than Uncle Turner, a reclusive and uncommunicative old rancher who limited his correspondence to small sparsely signed Christmas cards showing a sage brush decorated with baubles. Perhaps Uncle Moriarty, now a retirement-community resident on his last blue-veined legs, but once a certified public accountant and crack insurance investigator, could have made such a call, or even Aunt Smithers, a cousin of Uncle Moriarty, who, inebriated each evening by eight, made long-distance phone calls to deplore *National Review* editorials. He thought now of their faces, and the faces of the others, their cheeks stuffed with potato salad, peering down into the burning wreckage of the little homemade craft which had brought him into the world: their tender awe as they lifted him from the flames and found his infant form to be unscathed and extraordinarily powerful, the solemn oath of secrecy which bound together that casual half-dozen picnickers: some for the sheer romance of taking an oath in the summer night, some out of an instinct for euphemism.

The phone rang again and a voice identified itself as that of Ross Fastpack, who was calling as a representative of his boss, an afternoon talk-show host. In the wake of two last-minute cancellations, one by a singing duo scheduled for a Man of LaMancha medley and another by the author of a book on advances in foreplay techniques, they were in desperate need of another "celeb," as Fastback termed it, and was he available? Still hovering inches from the littered floor, he replied that he could fit such an appearance into his schedule.

"Right on," said Fastpack, and taping time and place was set.

"Just one thing," he said before Fastpack could hang up. "You better not be Burky."

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Later, fitting him between walk-on appearances by a breeder of obscure reptiles and the star of a series centered around a blind gunfighter of the Old Southwest, the talk-show host, once a big-band crooner, drew him out on memories of the old days when he was virtue incarnate, second only to the One True Lord, really, the nation's assurance that wherever it stumbled someone could always bail it out. But then the talk turned to astrological signs, nudity on the screen, pet care, L.A.-New York comparisons, and definitions of "soul." Tongue-tied by the proximity of an abundantly endowed actress in R-rated films, flustered, an astrological skeptic, he withdrew from the proceedings entirely and sat on the far end of the guest sofa to chuckle restlessly at the jibes of comics, to hear coy bodice references, to refuse half-hearted requests that he fly over the audience during station breaks. When the show was over, Fastpack brought him his check.

"Three hundred and fifty," Fastpack said. "Not much, but you got exposure."

"I'll be giving it to a favorite charity," he replied, heading for the exit.

The three hundred and fifty paid for groceries and rent for that month, favorite charities notwithstanding. Through it all, Burky persisted, actually appearing one afternoon dressed in London Fog rain gear, flashing F.B.I. credentials. Though he had never before actually seen Mr. Burky, his nasality was the giveaway.

"Herndon, sir," Burky said. "I hope there won't be trouble."

"I wondered when you'd show up here, Mr. Burky. Come on in."

"No hearty stuff," Burky said. "The name's Herndon and I have serious matters."

Burky walked in as his host hurried in front of him, tidying with extraordinary speed, irritated and exhilarated by the bill collector's visit.

"Don't bother with any of that," Burky said. "This shouldn't take long. I have papers here which suggest that you owe moneys. We're concerned in the department that moneys owed are paid. You can understand that."

"The trouble is, Mr. Burky," he said, "you're using the same voice you used for Uncle Turner. And why would the F.B.I. get into hideaway posturepedic billings? Really, Mr. Burky, I —"

"Don't call me that!" Burky exclaimed, his chin quivering. "I'm Herndon and I mean business." Burky took out a pink piece of paper and squinted at it. "This ought to be proof enough, even for you."

There was something especially

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nasty in this last remark, and he accepted the piece of paper for scrutiny with a look of suspicion and hostility. Burky shifted his feet slightly as his host perused the pink slip of paper which, it turned out, was a mail-order form for the hideaway posturepedic evidently bearing his signature.

"That's not my signature, Mr. Burky," he said, handing the order form back.

"Herndon! Herndon! Herndon!" Burky shouted, stamping his feet.

Mr. Peevy, as was his habit when awakened, banged on the wall for quiet.

"Mr. Burky, you're disturbing my neighbor. Now calm down. That document's a forgery. I'll prove it to you." Clenching his jaw and fists once more, he grimaced, said "Vroom," and found himself flying over the city, his pajamas fluttering, his mind racing through memorized police-file handwriting samples. He came up, almost immediately, with that of an Alonzo Bestor of Bayside, Queens, who happened to be prone and watching cartoons on his hideaway posturepedic when he swooped in through the window and stood in the living room of Alonzo's small, outwardly shabby but luxuriously appointed home, his hands on his hips, chest out, stomach in, teeth bared.

Alonzo, fearing the worst, rushed toward his intruder, said "You," and then helplessly bounced back, rolling along the floor and banging his shin on his mirror-topped bedside table.

"You're coming with me, Alonzo," he said, after making pajama-bottom drawstring adjustments. "And so's that hideaway posturepedic."

"That ain't no posturepedic," Alonzo said, his voice cracking slightly, his eyes brimming with tears. "That's a Barcalounger."

"Don't try to misle me," he replied, scooping up Alonzo and then the posturepedic, pleased with his use of the word "misle." "I know my furnishings."

In a little while longer than a flash, he was back in his own apartment with Alonzo and the posturepedic cradled in his mighty arms. "Here's the culprit, Burky," he said, standing before the awe-struck bill collector. "He forged my name and took the posturepedic. Wow! I feel terrific now."

Burky stepped forward uncertainly and faced the weeping Alonzo lying limp and out of breath in his abductor's arms.

"Heights," Alonzo said. "No heights."

"Why, you've terrified that man," Burky said. "We have laws in this country, you know. Search

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and seizure. Right to counsel. You can't just fly around picking up people."

"Well," he said, putting down Alonzo and the posturepedic. "You're not the first one to —"

"No back talk," Burky said, stamping again. "You don't have proof. You could be prosecuted for breaking and entering. Theft. Kidnapping. You name it."

Alonzo wavered on his feet and then fell towards Burky, grasping the little man's London Fog collar for support. "Can you blame me?" Alonzo said, staring into the sympathetic eyes of the little bill collector. "My parents had me late. Unwanted pregnancy. Claimed they were social drinkers. That's a laugh. Sent me to camps. I needed security. Found it in furnishings."

Alonzo's abductor could not get worked up over the story, but Burky put his arm around the weeping man's shoulder and said, "I don't blame this man. We have courts of law for that. As far as I'm concerned, he's had it rough. Now I'm going to get this man home and then notify proper authorities. Oh Jesus, look. He's wet his pants. Why can't you use normal channels," Burky said, leading Alonzo away, "like everybody else?"

The door closed behind Burky and Alonzo, leaving him alone in his pajamas. Finally, almost a full minute after their departure, he went to the door and called after them, "Oh, big deal. Very big deal." But they were already out on the street, headed for Queens. He closed the door, paced, and changed into Bermudas.

Once, in such a mood, he had flown out and hugged a major airline commuter-flight to an out-of-the-way municipal airport. But F.A.A. regulations, Supreme Court clampdowns and his own shaken confidence had severely limited his options for spiteful mischief. Lately, he had taken to flying to New Jersey to hide in the air, suffering the jibes of jumbo-jet pilots along the way.

But now, as Mr. Peevy, half asleep, continued to beat weakly on the wall next-door, he sat down, like some mighty toddler, on the posturepedic to watch Olympiad Trials coverage and scoff at the petty exertions of decathlon candidates. Then, in midscoff, his face darkened slightly, and, after a pause, he stood by the posturepedic, closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and said "Vroom."

Sometime soon, he thought for the hundredth time as he felt himself rise slightly from the floor, he would depart this place and fly upward in a laser-straight route out of the troubled atmosphere, past the cluttered moon, out beyond the stars, as soon as he remembered to pick up his gear at the cleaners.

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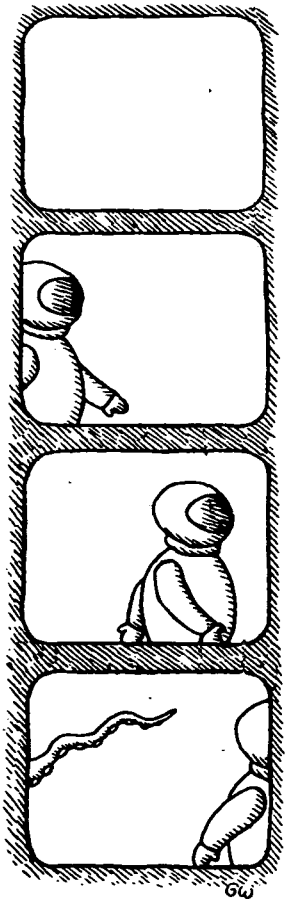
SINBAD, SHAMANS AND A STRANGLER

Ray Harryhausen, as most of you know, has been responsible for much of the best movie magic (in the sense of special effects) that the medium has produced, including a personal favorite of mine, "Jason and the Argonauts," which, under its pseudo-Hercules veneer, is a *truly* magic film. Therefore I anxiously awaited the newest from the team that made "Jason." It's called *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad,* co-produced, co-scripted and, of course, specially effected by Harryhausen, and, I am sorry to say, it is a great disappointment.

Oh, the effects are there, and most of them come off, though there are some surprising lapses. The intrepid voyager, Sinbad, gets involved in an Arabesque power struggle involving a Vizier who wears a golden mask because of his hideously scarred face, and the perpetrator of said scarring, one Prince Koura. It must all be resolved by a voyage to the island of Lemuria, last remnant of the well known continent of that name. The party — Sinbad, lucious lady, Sabu-type juvenile comic relief, Vizier and staunch sailors — lands, gets cryptic (and *very* long winded) advice from an oracle, a monstrous

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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floating head with bad teeth, is captured by green savages, etc., etc., et. The climactic battle is between a one-eyed centaur (a cenclops?) and a griffin, whose respective presences I'm not about to explain.

Now the flick is admittedly made for juves, and I freely plead guilty to expecting too much. The script is obviously built around the special effects, and the inbetweens are pretty awful. But even the successful effects were lessened by lack of content — the most marvelous things were happening right before my eyes, and I found myself thinking about mundane matters like lasagna. But I also found myself thinking about "Jason," which, though a just-for-action retelling of the Argosy, used its wondrous effects *imaginatively*. I think it's that simple.

There's an odd little film called *Hex* making the rounds which is more worth your while than most. Its elements may sound like the unlikely combination of the year, but somehow they work. An isolated farm in 1919 Nebraska is invaded by a group of motorcycle-riding youths on the way to California (it's made obvious that the *mystique* of the motorcycle gang has not yet developed, but is close). Two adolescent girls, Oriole and Acacia, live alone on the farm, their parents recently dead. Oriole, the older, resents the intruders' presence; Acacia is intrigued. In various ways and for various reasons, Oriole, through the magic taught her by their Indian shaman father, kills all the group save the leader (handsome but weak) and the youngest (innocent but strong). What I liked about the film was the total taken-for-grantedness of the fantasy element, the Indian magic, and the intelligence of its handling. There is absolutely no attempt at shock effect, an unheard of achievement given this type of film. Some of it is frightening (the leader's girlfriend is forced into the illusion that the land and the creatures of the land are attacking her) but the terror is *intrinsic*, not added.

It is also beautifully filmed — not just the landscape but even the motorcycles, wonderful antique things (one even has a side car) belching smoke across the pre-polluted landscape. I will take exception to its climax; what could have been a strongly tragic confrontation between the sisters just sort of peters out, and Oriole is seen as, if not justified, at least absolved of her murderous acts. Nonetheless, it certainly deserves the prize it won at a recent fantasy film festival in France.

A very late report on the made-for-TV movie, *The Night Strangler*, which I saw some time

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ago, and that on its second go-round. It is a sequel to "The Night Stalker," the vampire in Las Vegas piece which I admired for its sense and sensibility. The second had the same qualities, and this is directly tracable to the fact that they were both by Richard Matheson (the first was based on a novel by Jeff Rice). "The Night Strangler" answers the question (which if you haven't asked, you should have): what happens when one of those ghouls seeking an elixir of youth (with the absolutely necessary ingredient of young girls' blood) succeeds, but needs a refill every twenty years or so? A basic ingredient in the success of the two films is the quirky reporter hero in a pork pie hat; the performance by Darren McGavin is a priceless piece of character creation.

Now for a sweeping statement on movies (duck, everyone). I'd like to admit to feeling optimistic about the future of films in our favorite genre (and people who know me will know how rare a thing my optimism is). This is based on the success of two recent films — "The Exorcist" and "The Three Musketeers." The latter, while not falling in the bailiwick of this column, is a delight (and there is, of course, a connection between fantasy and the historical novel/film), and my major feeling on leaving it was one of a hunger fulfilled. At last, something intelligent, lavish and well made *that wasn't trying to tell me something.* I am so sick of intelligent little films with pots of messages, and I think the two movies mentioned indicate a trend, in their various ways, toward excapism and magic. Away with Social Significance! I've got quite enough of it right outside my window. We may yet see a "Sinbad" with an adult script.

Late, late show department... Regular readers may find me repetitious, but I saw "THX 1138" yet again and have got to say that every time I see it, I am more impressed. Not by its idea, so much — just another dreary future — but the amazing skill and artistry of its production. Watching this film is quite analogous to someone from the 19th century trying to absorb the details of contemporary life; it makes me feel a century behind.

Things-to-come department... Currently in production is a movie based on Edgar Rice Burroughs' "The Land That Time Forgot," co-scripted by none other than Michael Moorcock. I just hope that he showed the art department a lot of Frazetta covers...Also in the works, HPL's "Shadow Over Innsmouth" and "The Island of Dr. Moreau" (they'll have to go some to beat the '30's production of the latter).

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John Varley writes: "I am 26 years old. I belong to the following minorities: whites, males, Texans, southpaws, Very Tall People. I am also that much rarer bird, a male feminist. I believe that people will all benefit when any group is allowed to break out of the limitations imposed on them by birth." Which has a lot to do with the first-rate story you are about to read . . .

Picnic On Nearside

by JOHN VARLEY

This is the story of how I went to the Nearside and found old Lester and maybe grew up a little. And about time, too, as Carnival would say.

Carnival is my mother. We don't get along well most of the time, and I think it's because I'm twelve and she's ninety-six. She says it makes no difference, and she waited so long to have her child because she wanted to be sure she was ready for it. And I answer back that at her age she's too far away from childhood to remember what it's like. And she replies that her memory is perfect all the way back to her birth. And I retort...

We argue a lot.

I'm a good debater, but Carnival's a special problem. She's an Emotionalist; so anytime I try to bring facts into the argument she waves it away with a statement like, "Facts only get in the way of my preconceived notions." I tell her that's irrational, and she says I'm perfectly right, and she meant it to be. Most of the time we can't even agree on premises to base a disagreement on. You'd think that would be the death of debate, but if you did, you don't know Carnival and me.

The major topic of debate around our warren for seven or eight lunations had been the Change I wanted to get. The battle lines had been drawn, and we had been at it every day. She thought a Change would harm my mind at my age. *Every*body was getting one.

We were all sitting at the breakfast table. There was me and Carnival, and Chord, the man Carnival has lived with for several years, and Adagio, Chord's daughter. Adagio is seven.

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There had been a big battle the night before between me and Carnival. It had ended up (more or less) with me promising to divorce her as soon as I was of age. I don't remember what the counterthreat was. I had been pretty upset.

I was sitting there eating fitfully and licking my wounds. The argument had been inconclusive, philosophically, but from the pragmatic standpoint she had won, no question about it. The hard fact was that I couldn't get a Change until she affixed her personality index to the bottom of a sheet of input, and she said she'd put her brain in cold storage before she'd allow that. She would, too.

"I think I'm ready to have a Change," Carnival said to us.

"That's not fair!" I yelled. "You said that just to spite me. You just want to rub it in that I'm nothing and you're anything you want to be."

"We'll have no more of that," she said, sharply. "We've exhausted this subject, and I will not change my mind. You're too young for a Change."

"Blowout," I said. "I'll be an adult soon; it's only a year away. Do you really think I'll be all that different in a year?"

"I don't care to predict that. I hope you'll mature. But if, as you say, it's only a year, why are you in such a hurry?"

"And I wish you wouldn't use language like that," Chord said.

Carnival gave him a sour look. She has a hard line about outside interference when she's trying to cope with me. She doesn't want anyone butting in. But she wouldn't say anything in front of me and Adagio.

"I think you should let Fox get his Change," Adagio said, and grinned at me. Adagio is a good kid, as younger foster-siblings go. I could always count on her to back me up, and I returned the favor when I could.

"You keep out of this," Chord advised her, then to Carnival, "Maybe we should leave the table until you and Fox get this settled."

"You'd have to stay away for a year," Carnival said. "Stick around. The discussion is over. If Fox thinks different, he can go to his room."

That was my cue, and I got up and ran from the table. I felt silly doing it, but the tears were real. It's just that there's a part of me that stays cool enough to try and get the best of any situation.

Carnival came to see me a little later, but I did my best to make her feel unwelcome. I can be good at that, at least with her. She left when it became obvious she couldn't make anything any better. She was hurt, and when the door closed, I felt really miserable, mad at her

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and at myself, too. I was finding it hard to love her as much as I had a few years before, and feeling ashamed because I couldn't.

I worried over that for a while and decided I should apologize. I left my room and was ready to go cry in her arms, but it didn't happen that way. Maybe if it had, things would have been different and Halo and I would never have gone to Nearside.

Carnival and Chord were getting ready to go out. They said they'd be gone most of the lune. They were dressing up for it, and what bothered me and made me change my plans was that they were dressing in the family room instead of in their own private rooms where I thought they should.

She had taken off her feet and replaced them with peds, which struck me as foolish, since peds only make sense in free-fall. But Carnival wears them every chance she gets, prancing around like a high-stepping horse because they are so unsuited to walking. I think people look silly with hands on the ends of their legs. And naturally she had left her feet lying on the floor.

Carnival glanced at her watch and said something about how they would be late for the shuttle. As they left, she glanced over her shoulder.

"Fox, would you do me a favor and put those feet away, Please? Thanks." Then she was gone.

An hour later, in the depths of my depression, the door rang. It was a woman I had never seen before. She was nude.

You know how sometimes you can look at someone you know who's just had a Change and recognize them instantly, even though they might be twenty centimeters shorter or taller and mass fifty kilos more or less and look nothing at all like the person you knew? Maybe you don't, because not everyone has this talent, but I have it very strong. Carnival says it's an evolutionary change in the race, a response to the need to recognize other individuals who can change their appearance at will. That may be true; she can't do it at all.

I think it's something to do with the way a person wears a body: any body, of either sex. Little mannerisms like blinking, mouth movements, stance, fingers; maybe even the total kinesthetic gestalt the doctors talk about. This was like that. I could see behind the pretty female face and the different height and weight and recognize someone I knew. It was Halo, my best friend, who had been a male the last time I saw him, three lunes ago. She had a big foolish grin on her face.

"Hi, Fox," she said, in a voice

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that was an octave higher and yet was unmistakably Halo's. "Guess who?"

"Queen Victoria, right?" I tried to sound bored. "Come on in, Halo."

Her face fell. She came in, looking confused.

"What do you think?" she said, turning slowly to give me a look from all sides. All of them were good because — as if I needed anything else — her mother had let her get the full treatment: fully developed breasts, all the mature curves — the works. She had been denied only the adult height. She was even a few centimeters shorter than she had been.

"It's fine," I said.

"Listen, Fox, if you'd rather I left..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Halo," I said, giving up on my hatred. "You look great. Fabulous. Really you do. I'm just having a hard time being happy for you. Carnival is never going to give in."

She was instantly sympathetic. She took my hand, startling me badly.

"I was so happy I guess I was tactless," she said in a low voice. "Maybe I shouldn't have come over here yet."

She looked at me with big brown eyes (they had been blue, usually), and I started realizing what this was going to mean to me. I mean, Halo? A female? Halo, the guy I used to run the corridors with? The guy who helped me build that awful eight-legged cat that Carnival wouldn't let in the house and looked like a confused caterpillar? Who made love to the same girls I did and compared notes with me later when we were alone and helped me out when the gang tried to beat me up and cried with me and vowed to get even? Could we do any of that now? I didn't know. Most of my best friends were male, maybe because the sex thing tended to make matters too complicated with females, and I couldn't handle both things with the same person yet.

But Halo was having no such doubts. In fact, she was standing very close to me and practicing a wide-eyed innocent look that she knew did funny things to me. She knew it because I had told her so, back when she was a boy. Somehow that didn't seem fair.

"Ah, listen, Halo," I said hastily, backing away. She had been going for my pants! "Ah, I think I need some time to get used to this. How can I...? You know what I'm talking about, don't you?" I don't think she did, and neither did I, really. All I knew was I was unaccountably mortified at what she was so anxious to try. And she was still coming at me.

"Say!" I said, desperately.

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"Say! I have an idea! Ah... I know. Let's take Carnival's jumper and go for a ride, okay? She said I could use it today." My mouth was leading its own life, out of control. Everything I said was extemporaneous, as much news to me as it was to her.

She stopped pursuing me. "Did she really?"

"Sure," I said, very assured. This was only a half lie, by my mother's lights. What had happened was I had meant to ask her for the jumper, and I was sure she would have said yes. I was logically certain she would have. I had just forgotten to ask, that's all. So it was almost as if permission had been granted, and I went on as if it had. The reasoning behind this is tricky, I admit, but as I said, Carnival would have understood.

"Well," Halo said, not really overjoyed at the idea, "where would we go?"

"How about to Old Archimedes?" Again, that was a big surprise to me. I had had no idea I wanted to go there.

Halo was really shocked. I jolted her right out of her new mannerisms. She reacted just like the old Halo would have, with a dopey face and open mouth. Then she tried on other reactions: covering her mouth with her hands and wilting a little. First-time Changers are like that; new women tend to mince around like something out of a gothic novel, and new men swagger and grunt like Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire.* They get over it.

Halo got over it right in front of my eyes. She stared at me, scratching her head.

"Are you crazy? Old Archimedes is on the Nearside. They don't let anybody go over there."

"Don't they?" I asked, suddenly interested. "Do you know that for a fact? And if so, why not?"

"Well, I mean everybody knows..."

"Do they? Who is 'they' that won't let us go?"

The Central Computer, I guess."

"Well, the only way to find out is to try it. Come on, let's go." I grabbed her arm. I could see she was confused, and I wanted it to remain that way until I could get my own thoughts together.

"I'd like a flight plan to Old Archimedes on the Nearside," I said, trying to sound as grown-up and unworried as possible. We had packed a lunch and reached the field in ten minutes, due largely to my frantic prodding.

"That's a little imprecise, Fox," said the CC. "Old Archimedes is a big place. Would you like to try again?"

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"Ah..." I drew a blank. Damn all computers and their literal-mindedness! What did I know about Old Archimedes? About as much as I knew about Old New York or Old Bombay.

"Give me a flight plan to the main landing field."

"That's better. The data are..." It reeled off the string of numbers. I fed them into the pilot and tried to relax.

"Here goes," I said to Halo. "This is Fox-Carnival-Joule, piloting private jumper AX1453, based at King City. I hereby file a flight plan to Old Archimedes main landing field, described as follows..." I repeated the numbers the CC had given me. "Filed on the seventeenth lune of the fourth lunation of the year 214 of the Occupation of Earth. I request an initiation time."

"Granted. Time as follows: thirty seconds from mark. Mark."

I was stunned. "That's all there is to it?"

It chuckled. Damn maternalistic machine. "What did you expect, Fox? Marshals converging on your jumper?"

"I don't know. I guess I thought you wouldn't allow us to go to the Nearside."

"A popular misconception. You are a free citizen, although a minor, and able to go where you wish on the lunar surface. You are subject only to the laws of the state and the specific wishes of your parent as programmed into me. I... do you wish me to start the burn for you?"

"Mind your own business." I watched the tick and pressed the button when it reached zero. The acceleration was mild, but went on for a long time. Hell, Old Archimedes is at the antipodes.

"I have the responsibility to see that you do not endanger yourself through youthful ignorance or forgetfulness. I must also see that you obey the wishes of your mother. Other than that, you are on your own."

"You mean Carnival gave me permission to go to the Nearside?"

"I didn't say that. I have received no instruction from Carnival *not* to permit you to go to Nearside. There are no unusual dangers to your safety on Nearside. So I had no choice but to approve your flight plan." It paused, significantly. "It is my experience that few parents consider it necessary to instruct me to deny such permission. I infer that it's because so few people ever ask to go there. I also note that your parent is at the present moment unreachable; she has left instructions not to be disturbed. Fox," the CC said, accusingly, "it occurs to me that this is no accident. Did you have this planned?"

I *hadn't!* But if I'd known....

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"No."

"I suppose you want a return flight plan?"

"Why? I'll ask you when I'm ready to come back."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," it said, smugly. "In another five minutes you'll be out of range of my last receptor. I don't extend to the Nearside, you know. Haven't in decades. You're going out of contact, Fox. You'll be on your own. Think about it."

I did. For a queasy moment I wanted to turn back. Without the CC to monitor us, kids wouldn't be allowed on the surface for *years*.

Was I that confident? I know how hostile the surface is if it ever gets the drop on you. I thought I had all the mistakes trained out of me by now, but did I?

"How exciting," Halo gushed. She was off in the clouds again, completely over her shock at where we were going. She was bubble-headed like that for three lunes after her Change. Well, so was I, later, when I had my first.

"Hush, numskull," I said, not unkindly. Nor was she insulted. She just grinned at me and gawked out the window as we approached the terminator.

I checked the supply of consumables; they were in perfect shape for a stay of a full lunation if need be, though I had larked off without a glance at the delta-vee.

"All right, smartass, give me the data for the return."

"Incomplete request," the CC drawled.

"Damn you, I want a flight plan Old Archimedes-King City, and no back talk."

"Noted. Assimilated." It gave me that data. Its voice was getting fainter.

"I don't suppose," it said, diffidently, "that you'd care to give me an indication of when you plan to return?"

Ha! I had it where it hurt. Carnival wouldn't be happy with the CC's explanation, I was sure of that.

"Tell her I've decided to start my own colony and I'll never come back."

"As you wish."

Old Archimedes was bigger than I had expected. I knew that even in its heyday it had not been as populated as King City is, but they built more above the surface in those days. King City is not much more than a landing field and a few domes. Old Archimedes was chock-a-block with structures, all clustered around the central landing field. Halo pointed out some interesting buildings to the south, and so I went over there and set down next to them.

She opened the door and threw out the tent, then jumped after it. I

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followed, taking the ladder since I seemed elected to carry the lunch. She took a quick look around and started unpacking the tent.

"We'll go exploring later," she said, breathlessly. "Right now let's get in the tent and eat. I'm hungry."

All right, all right, I said to myself. I've got to face it sooner or later. I didn't think she was really all that hungry — not for the picnic lunch, anyway. This was still going too fast for me. I had no idea what our relationship would be when we crawled out of that tent.

While she was setting it up, I took a more leisurely look around. Before long I was wishing we had gone to Tranquillity Base instead. It wouldn't have been as private, but there are no spooks at Tranquillity. Come to think of it, Tranquillity Base used to be on the Nearside, before they moved it.

About Old Archimedes:

I couldn't put my finger on what disturbed me about the place. Not the silence. The race has had to adjust to silence since we were forced off the Earth and took to growing up on the junk planets of the system. Not the lack of people. I was accustomed to long walks on the surface where I might not see anyone for hours. I don't know. Maybe it was the Earth hanging there a little above the horizon.

It was in crescent phase, and I wished uselessly for the old days when that dark portion would have been sprayed with points of light that were the cities of mankind. Now there was only the primitive night and the dolphins in the sea and the aliens — bogies cooked up to ruin the sleep of a child, but now I was not so sure. If humans still survive down there, we have no way of knowing it.

They say that's what drove people to the Farside: the constant reminder of what they had lost, always there in the sky. It must have been hard, especially to the Earthborn. Whatever the reason, no one had lived on the Nearside for almost a century. All the original settlements had dwindled as people migrated to the comforting empty sky of Farside.

I think that's what I felt, hanging over the old buildings like some invisible moss. It was the aura of fear and despair left by all the people who had buried their hopes here and moved away to the forgetfulness of Farside. There were ghosts here, all right: the shades of unfulfilled dreams and endless longing. And over it all a bottomless sadness.

I shook myself and came back to the present. Halo had the tent ready. It bulged up on the empty field, a clear bubble just a little higher than my head. She was already inside. I crawled through

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the sphincter, and she sealed it behind me.

Halo's tent is a good one. The floor is about three meters in diameter, plenty of room for six people if you don't mind an occasional kick. It had a stove, a stereo set, and a compact toilet. It recycled water, scavenged CO_2, controlled temperature, and could provide hydroponic oxygen for three lunations. And it all folded into a cube thirty centimeters on a side.

Halo had skinned out of her suit as soon as the door was sealed and was bustling about, setting up the kitchen. She took the lunch hamper from me and started to work.

I watched her with keen interest as she prepared the food. I wanted to get an insight into what she was feeling. It wasn't easy. Every fuse in her head seemed to have blown.

First-timers often overreact, seeking a new identity for themselves before it dawns on them there was nothing wrong with the old one. Since our society offers so little differentiation between the sex roles, they reach back to where the differences are so vivid and startling: novels, dramas, films, and tapes from the old days on Earth and the early years on the moon. They have the vague idea that since they have this new body and it lacks a penis or vagina, they should behave differently.

I recognized the character she had fallen into; I'm as interested in old culture as the next kid. She was Blondie and I was supposed to be Dagwood. The Bumsteads, you know. Typical domestic nineteenth century couple. She had spread a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth and set two places with dishes, napkins, washbowls, and a tiny electric candelabra.

I had to smile at her, kneeling at the tiny stove, trying to put three pans on the same burner. She was trying so hard to please me with a role I was completely uninterested in. She was humming as she worked.

After the meal, I offered to clean up for her (well, *Dagwood* would have), but Blondie said no, that's all right, dear, I'll take care of everything. I lay flat on my back, holding my belly, and watched the Earth. Presently I felt a warm body cuddle up, half beside me and half on top of me, and press close from toenails to eyebrows. She had left Blondie over among the dirty dishes. The woman who breathed in my ear now was — Helen of Troy? Greta Garbo? — someone new, anyway. I wished fervently that Halo would come back. I was beginning to think Halo and I could screw like the very deveil if this feverish creature that contained her would only give us a chance. Meantime, I had to be

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raped by Helen of Troy. I raised my head.

"What's it like, Halo?"

She slowed her foreplay slightly, but it never really stopped. She propped herself up on one elbow.

"I don't think I can describe it to you."

"Please try."

She dimpled. "I don't really know what it's *all* like," she said. "I'm still a virgin, you know."

I sat up. "You got *that, too?*"

"Sure, why not? But don't worry about it. I'm not afraid."

"What about making love?"

"Oh, Fox, Fox! Yes, yes. I..."

"No, no! Wait a minute." I squirmed beneath her, trying to hold her off a little longer. "What I meant was, wasn't there any problem in making the shift? I mean, do you have any aversion to having sex with boys now?" It was sure a stupid question, but she took it seriously.

"I haven't noticed any problem so far," she said, thoughtfully, as her hand reached down and fumbled, inexpertly trying to guide me in. I helped her get it right, and she poised, squatting on her toes. "I thought about that before the Change, but it sort of melted away. Now I don't feel any qualms at all. Ahhhhh!" She had thrust herself down, brutally hard, and we were off and running.

It was the most unsatisfactory sex act I ever had. It was not entirely the fault of either of us; external events were about to mess us up totally. But it wasn't very good even without that.

A first-time female Changer is liable to be in delirious oblivion through the entire first sex act, which may last all of sixty seconds. The fact that she is playing the game from the other court with a different set of rules and a new set of equipment does not handicap her. Rather, it provides a tremendous erotic stimulus.

That's what happened to Halo. I began to wonder if she'd wait for me. I never found out. I looked away from her face and got the shock of my life. There was someone standing outside the tent, watching us.

Halo felt the change in me and looked at my face, which must have been a sight, then looked over her shoulder. She fainted; out like a light.

Hell, I almost fainted myself. Would have, but when she did, it scared me even more, and I decided I couldn't indulge it. So I stayed awake to see what was going on.

It looked way too much like one of the ghosts my imagination had been walking through the abandoned city ever since we got there. The figure was short and dressed in a suit that might have been stolen from the museum at Kepler, except

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that it was more patches than suit. I could tell little about who might be in it, not even the sex. It was bulky, and the helmet was reflective.

I don't know how long I stared at it; long enough for the spook to walk around the tent three or four times. I reached for the bottle of white wine we had been drinking and took a long pull. I found out that's an old movie cliche; it didn't make anything any better. But it sure did things for Halo when I poured it in her face.

"Get in your suit," I said, as she sat up, sputtering. "I think that character wants to talk to us." He was waving at us and pointing to what might have been a radio on his suit.

We suited up and crawled through the sphincter. I kept saying hello as I ran through the channels on my suit. Nothing worked. Then he came over and touched helmets. He sounded far away.

"What're you doin' here?"

I had thought that would have been obvious.

"Sir, we just came over here for a picnic. Are we on your land or something? If so, I'm sorry, and..."

"No, no," he waved it off. "You can do as you please, I ain't your ma. As to owning, I guess I own this whole city, but you're welcome to do as you please with most of it. Do as you please, that's my philosophy. That's why I'm still here. They couldn't get old Lester to move out. I'm old Lester."

"I'm Fox, sir," I said.

"And I'm Halo." She heard us over my radio.

He turned and looked at her.

"Halo," he said, quietly. "A Halo for an angel. Nice name, miss." I was wishing I could see his face. He sounded like an adult, but he was sure a small one. Both of us were taller than he was, and we're not much above average for our age.

He coughed. "I, ah, I'm sorry I disturbed you folks... ah," he seemed embarrassed. "I just couldn't help myself. I haven't seen any people for a long time — oh, ten years, I guess — and I just had to get a closer look. And I, uh, I needed to ask you something."

"And what's that, sir?"

"You can knock off the 'sir.' I ain't your pa. I wanted to know if you folks had any medicine?"

"There's a first-aid kit in the jumper," I said. "Is there someone in need of help? I'd be glad to take them to a hospital in King City."

He was waving his arms frantically.

"No, no, no. I don't want doctors poking around. I just need a little medicine. Uh, say, could you take that first-aid kit out of the jumper and come to my warren for a bit? Maybe you got something in there I could use."

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We agreed, and followed him across the field.

He led us into an unpressurized building at the edge of the field. We threaded our way through dark corridors.

We came to a big cargo lock, stepped inside, and he cycled it. Then we went through the inner door and into his warren.

It was quite a place, more like a jungle than a home. It was as big as the Civic Auditorium at King City and overgrown with trees, vines, flowers, and bushes. It looked like it had been tended at one time, but allowed to go wild. There were a bed and a few chairs in one corner, and several tall stacks of books. And heaps of junk; barrels of leak sealant, empty O_2 cylinders, salvaged instruments, buggy tires.

Halo and I had our helmets off and were half out of our suits when we got our first look at him. He was incredible! I'm afraid I gasped, purely from reflex; Halo just stared. Then we politely tried to pretend there was nothing unusual.

He looked like he made a habit of going out without his suit. His face was grooved and pitted like a plowed field after an artillery barrage. His skin looked as tough as leather. His eyes were sunk into deep pits.

"Well, let me see it," he said, sticking out a thin hand. His knuckles were swollen and knobby.

I handed him the first-aid kit, and he fumbled with the catches, then got it open. He sat in a chair and carefully read the label on each item. He mumbled while he read.

Halo wandered among the plants, but I was more curious about old Lester than about his home. I watched him handle the contents of the kit with stiff, clumsy fingers. All his movements seemed stiff. I couldn't imagine what might be wrong with him and wondered why he hadn't sought medical help long ago, before whatever was afflicting him could go this far.

At last he put everything back in the kit but two tubes of cream. He sighed and looked at us.

"How old are you?" he asked, suspiciously.

"I'm twenty," I said. I don't know why. I'm not a liar, usually, unless I have a good reason. I was just beginning to get a funny feeling about old Lester, and I followed my instincts.

"Me, too," Halo volunteered.

He seemed satisfied, which surprised me. I was realizing he had been out of touch for a long time. Just how long I didn't know yet.

"There ain't much here that'll be of use to me, but I'd like to buy these here items, if you're willin' to sell. Says here they're for 'topical anesthesia,' and I could use some of

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that in the mornings. How much?"

I told him he could have them for nothing, but he insisted; so I told him to set his own price and reached for my credit meter in my suit pouch. He was holding out some rectangular slips of paper. They were units of paper currency, issued by the old Lunar Free State in the year 76 O.E. They had not been used in over a century. They were worth a fortune to a collector.

"Lester," I said, slowly, "these are worth more than you probably realize. I could sell them in King City for..."

He cackled. "Good man. I know what them bills is worth. I'm decrepit, but I ain't senile. They're worth thousands to one what wants 'em, but they're worthless to me. Except for one thing. They're a damn good test for findin' an honest man. They let me know if somebody'd take advantage of a sick, senile ol' hermit like me. Pardon me, son, but I had you pegged for a liar when you come in here. I was wrong. So you keep the bills. Otherwise, I'd a took 'em back."

He threw something on the floor in front of us, something he'd had in his hand and I hadn't even seen. It was a gun. I had never seen one.

Halo picked it up, gingerly, but I didn't want to touch it. This old Lester character seemed a lot less funny to me now. We were quiet.

"Now I've gone and scared you," he said. "I guess I've forgot all my manners. And I've forgot how you folks live on the other side." He picked up the gun and opened it. The charge chamber was empty. "But you wouldn't of knowed it, would you? Anyways, I'm not a killer. I just pick my friends real careful. Can I make up the fright I've caused you by inviting you to dinner? I haven't had any guests for ten years."

We told him we'd just eaten, and he asked if we could stay and just talk for a while. He seemed awfully eager. We said okay.

"You want some clothes? I don't expect you figured on visiting when you come here."

"Whatever your custom is," Halo said, diplomatically.

"I got no customs," he said, with a toothless grin. "If you don't feel funny naked, it ain't no business of mine. Do as you please, I say." It was a stock phrase with him.

So we lay on the grass, and he got some very strong clear liquor and poured us all drinks.

"Moonshine," he laughed. "The genuine article. I make it myself. Best liquor on the Nearside."

We talked, and we drank.

Before I got too drunk to remember anything, a few interesting facts emerged about old Lester. For one thing, he really was

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old. He said he was two hundred and fifty-seven, and he was Earthborn. He had come to the moon when he was twenty-eight, several years before the Invasion.

I know several people in that age range, though none quite that old. Carnival's great-grandmother is two twenty-one, but she's moonborn, and doesn't remember the Invasion. There's virtually nothing left of the flesh she was born with. She's transferred her memories to a new brain twice.

I was prepared to believe that old Lester had gone a long time without medical care, but I couldn't accept what he told us at first. He said that, barring one new heart eighty years ago, he was unreconstructed since his birth! I'm young and naive — I freely admit it now — but I couldn't swallow that. But I believed it eventually, and I believe it now.

He had a million stories to tell, all of them at least eighty years old because that's how long he had been a hermit. He had stories of Earth, and of the early years on the moon. He told us about the hard years after the Invasion. Everyone who lived through that has a story to tell. I drew a blank before the evening was over, and the only thing I remember clearly is the three of us standing in a circle, arms around each other, singing a song old Lester had taught us. We swayed against each other and bumped foreheads and broke up laughing. I remember his hand resting on my shoulder. It was hard as rock.

The next day Halo became Florence Nightingale and nursed old Lester back to life. She was as firm as any nurse, getting him out of his clothes over his feeble protests, then giving him a massage. In the soberness of the morning I wondered how she could bring herself to touch his wrinkled old body, but as I watched, I slowly understood. He was beautiful.

The best thing to compare old Lester to is the surface. There is nothing older, or more abused, than the surface of the moon. But I have always loved it. It's the most beautiful place in the system, including Saturn's Rings. Old Lester was like that. I imagined he *was* the moon. He had become part of it.

Though I came to accept his age, I could still see that he was in terrible shape. The drinking had taken a lot out of him, but he wouldn't be kept down. The first thing he wanted in the morning was another drink. I brought him one, then I cooked a big breakfast: eggs and sausage and bread and orange juice, all from his garden. Then we were off and drinking again.

I didn't even have time to worry

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about what Carnival and Halo's mother might be thinking by now. Old Lester had plainly adopted us. He said he'd be our father, which struck me as a funny thing to say since who the hell ever knows who their father is? But he began behaving in the manner I would call maternal, and he evidently thought of it as *pa*ternal.

We did a lot of things that day. He taught us about gardening.

He showed me how to cross-fertilize the egg plants and how to tell when they were ripe without breaking the shells to see. He told us the secrets of how to grow breadfruit trees so they'd yield loaves of dark-brown, hard, whole wheat or the strangely different rye variety by grafting branches. I had never had rye before. And we learned to dig for potatoes and steakroots. We learned how to harvest honey and cheese and tomatoes. We stripped bacon from the surface of the porktree trunks.

And we'd drink his moonshine while we worked, and laugh a lot, and he'd throw in more of his stories between the garden lore.

Old Lester was not the fool he had seemed at first. His speech pattern was largely affected, something he did to amuse himself over the years. He could speak as correctly as anyone when he wanted to. He had read much and remembered it all. He was a first-rate engineer and botanist, but his education and skills had to be qualified by this fact: everything he knew was eighty years out of date. It didn't matter much: the old methods worked well enough.

In social matters it was a different story.

He didn't know much about Changing, except that he didn't like it. It was Changing that finally decided him to separate himself from society. He said he had been having his doubts about joining the migration to Farside, and the sex-change issue had been the final factor. He shocked us more than he knew when he revealed that he had never been a woman. I thought his lack of curiosity must be monumental, but I was wrong. It turned out that he had some queer notions about the morality of the whole process, ideas he had gotten from some weirdly aberrant religion in his childhood. I had heard of the cult, as you can hardly avoid it if you know any history. It had said little about ethics, being more interested in arbitrary regulations.

Old Lester still believed in it, though. His home was littered with primitive icons. There was a central symbol he cherished above the others: a simple wooden fetish in the shape of a plus sign with a long stem. He wore one around his neck, and others sprouted like weeds.

I came to realize that this

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religion was at the bottom of the puzzling inconsistencies I began to notice about him. His "do as you please" may have been sincere, but he did not entirely live by it. It became clear that, though he thought people should have freedom of choice, he condemned them if the choice they made was not his own.

My spur-of-the-moment decision to lie about my age had been borne out, though I'm not sure the truth wouldn't have been better. It might have kept us out of the further lies we told or implied, and I always prefer honesty to deception. But I still don't know if old Lester could have been our friend without the lies.

He knew something of life on Farside and made it clear he disapproved of most of it. And he had deluded himself (with our help) that we weren't like that. In particular, he thought people should not have sex until they reached a "decent age." He never defined that, but Halo and I, at "twenty," were safely past it.

It was a puzzling notion. Even Carnival, who is a bit old-fashioned, would have been shocked. Granted, we speed up puberty now — I have been sexually potent since I was seven — but he felt that even *after* puberty people should abstain. I couldn't make any sense out of it. I mean, what would you *do?*

Then there was a word he used, "incest," that I had to look up when I got home to be sure I'd understood him. I had. He was against it. I guess it had a basis back in the dawn of time, when procreation and genetics were so tied up with sex, but how could it matter now? The only place Carnival and I get along at all is in bed; without that, we would have very little in common.

It went on and on, the list of regulations. Luckily, it didn't sour me on old Lester. All I disliked was the lies we had trapped ourselves into. I'm willing to let people have all sorts of screwball notions as long as they don't force them on me, like Carnival was doing about the Change. That I found myself expressing agreement with old Lester's ideas was my own fault, not his. I think.

The days went by, marred by only one thing. I had not broken any laws, but I knew I was being searched for. And I knew I was treating Carnival badly. I tried to figure out just how badly, and what I should do about it, but kept getting fogged up by the moonshine and good times.

Carnival had come to the Nearside. Halo and I had watched them from the shadows when old Lester's radar had picked them up coming in. There had been six or seven figures in the distance. They

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had entered the jumper and made a search. They had cast around at the edge of the field for our tracks, found them, and followed them to where they disappeared on concrete. I would have liked to have listened in, but didn't dare because they were sure to have detection apparatus for that.

And they left. They left the jumper, which was nice of them, since they could have taken it and rendered us helpless to wait for their return.

I thought about it, and talked it over with Halo. Several times we were ready to give up and go back. After all, we hadn't really set out to run away from home. We had only been defying authority, and it had never entered my head that we would stay as long as we had. But now that we were here we found it hard to go back. The trip to Nearside had acquired an inertia of its own, and we didn't have the strength to stop it.

In the end we went to the other extreme. We decided to stay on Nearside forever. I think we were giddy with the sense of power a decision like that made us feel. So we covered up our doubts with backslapping encouragement, a lot of giggling, and inflated notions of what we and old Lester would do at Archimedes.

We wrote a note — which proved we still felt responsible to *someone* — and taped it to the ladder of the jumper; then Halo went in and turned on the outside lights and pointed them straight up. We retired to a hiding place and waited.

Sure enough, another ship returned in two hours. They had been watching from close orbit and landed on the next pass when they noticed the change. One person got out of the ship and read the note. It was a crazy note, saying not to worry, we were all right. It went on to say we intended to stay, and some more things I'd rather not remember. It also said she should take the jumper. I was regretting that even as she read it. We must have been crazy.

I could see her slump even from so far away. She looked all around her, then began signaling in semaphore language.

"Do what you have to," she signaled. "I don't understand you, but I love you. I'm leaving the jumper in case you change your mind."

Well. I gulped, and was halfway up on my way out to her when, to my great surprise, Halo pulled me down. I had thought she was only going along with me to avoid having to point out how wrong I was. This hadn't been her idea; she had not been in her right mind when I hustled her over here. But she had settled down from all that

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lunes ago and was now as level-headed as ever. And was more taken with our adventure than I was.

"Dope!" she hissed, touching helmets. "I thought you'd do something like that. Think it through. Do you want to give up so easy? We haven't even tried this yet."

Her face wasn't as certain as her words, but I was in no shape to argue her out of it. Then Carnival was gone, and I felt better. It was true that we had an out if it turned sour. Pretty soon we were intrepid pioneers, and I didn't think of Carnival or the Farside until things *did* start to go sour.

For a long time, almost a lunation, we were happy. We worked hard every day with old Lester. I learned that in his kind of life the work was never done; there was always an air duct to repair, flowers to pollinate, machinery to regulate. It was primitive, and I could usually see ways to improve the methods but never thought of suggesting them. It wouldn't have fit with our crazy pioneer ideas. Things *had* to be hard to feel right.

We built a grass lean-to like one we had seen in a movie and moved in. It was across the chamber from old Lester, which was silly, but it meant we could visit each other. And I learned an interesting thing about sin.

Old Lester would watch us make love in our raggedy shack, a grin across his leathery face. Then one day he implied that lovemaking should be a private act. It was a sin to do it in front of others, and a sin to watch. But he still watched.

So I asked Halo about it.

"He needs a little sin, Fox."

"Huh?"

"I know it isn't logical, but you must have seen by now that his religion is mixed up."

"That's for sure. But I still don't get it."

"Well, I don't either, but I try to respect. He thinks drinking is sinful, and until we came along it was the only sin he could practice. Now he can do the sin of lust, too. I think he needs to be forgiven for things, and he can't be forgiven until he does them."

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard. But even crazier, if lust is a sin to him, why doesn't he go all the way and make love with you? I've been dead sure he wants to, but as far as I know, he's never done it. Has he?"

She looked at me pityingly. "You don't know, do you?"

"You mean he has?"

"No. I don't mean that. We haven't. And not because I haven't tried. And not because he doesn't want to. He looks, looks, looks; he never takes his eyes off me. And it isn't because he thinks it's a sin. He

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knows it's a sin, but he'd do it if he could."

"I still don't understand, then."

"What do you mean? I just told you. He *can't*. He's too old. His equipment won't function anymore."

"That's *terrible!*" I was almost sick. I knew there was a word for his condition, but I had to look it up a long time afterward. The word is crippled. It means some part of your body doesn't work right. Old Lester had been sexually crippled for over a century.

I seriously considered going home then. I was not at all sure he was the kind of person I wanted to be around. The lies were getting more galling every day, and now this.

But things got much worse, and still I stayed.

He was ill. I don't mean the way we think of ill; some petty malfunction to be cleared up by a ten-minute visit to the bioengineers. He was wearing out.

It was partly our fault. Even that first morning he was not very quick out of bed. Each lune — after a long night of drinking and general hell-raising — he was a little slower to get up. It got to where Halo was spending an hour each morning just massaging him into shape to stand erect. I thought at first he was just cannily malingering because he liked the massage and Halo's intimacy when she worked him over. That was not the case. When he did get up, he hobbled, bent over from pains in his belly. He would forget things. He would stumble, fall, and get up very slowly.

"I'm dying," he said one night. I gasped; Halo blinked rapidly. I tried to cover my embarrassment by pretending he hadn't said it.

"I know it's a bad word now, and I'm sorry if I offended you. But I ain't lived this long without being able to look it in the eye. I'm dying, all right, and I'll be dead pretty soon. I didn't think it'd come so sudden. Everything seems to be quittin' on me."

We tried to convince him that he was wrong and, when that didn't work, to convince him that he should take a short hop to Farside and get straightened out. But we couldn't get through his superstition. He was awfully afraid of the engineers on Farside. We would try to show him that periodic repairs still left the mind — he called it the "soul" — unchanged, but he'd get philosophical.

The next day he didn't get up at all. Halo rubbed his old limbs until she was stiff. It was no good. His breathing became irregular, and his pulse was hard to find.

So we were faced with the toughest decision ever. Should we allow him to die, or carry him to the

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jumper and rush him to a repair shop? We sweated over it all lune. Neither course felt right, but I found myself arguing to take him back, and Halo said we shouldn't. He could not hear us except for brief periods when he'd rouse himself and try to sit up. Then he'd ask us questions or say things that seemed totally random. His brain must have been pretty well scrambled by then.

"You kids aren't really twenty, are you?" he said once.

"How did you know?"

He cackled, weakly.

"Old Lester ain't no dummy. You said that to cover up what I caught you doin' so's I wouldn't tell your folks. But I won't tell. That's your business. Just wanted you to know you didn't fool me, not for a minute." He lapsed into labored breathing.

We never did settle the argument, unless by default. What I wanted to do took some action, and in the end I didn't have it in me to get up and do it. I wasn't sure enough of myself. So we sat there on his bed, waiting for him to die and talking to him when he needed it. Halo held his hand.

I went through hell. I cursed him for a vacuum-skulled, mentally defective, prehistoric poop, and almost decided to help him out in his pea-brained search for death. Then I went the other way; loving him almost like he loved his crazy God. I imagined he was the mother that Carnival had never really been to me and that my world would have no purpose when he was dead. Both those reactions were crazy, of course; old Lester was just a person. He was a little crazy and a little saintly, and hardly a person you should either love or hate. It was Death that had me going in circles: the creepy black-robed skeletal figure old Lester had told us about, straight out of his superstition.

He opened one bleary eye after hours of no movement.

"Don't ever," he said. "You shouldn't ever. You, I mean. Halo. Don't ever get a Change. You always been a girl, you always should be. The Lord intended it that way."

Halo shot a quick glance at me. She was crying, and her eyes told me: *don't breathe a word. Let him believe it.* She needn't have worried.

Then he started coughing. Blood came from his lips, and as soon as I saw it, I passed out. I thought he would literally fall apart and rot into some awful green slime, slime that I could never wash off.

Halo wouldn't let me stay out. She slapped me until my ears were ringing, and when I was awake, we gave up. We couldn't make a

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meaningful decision in the face of *this*. We had to give it to someone else.

So twenty-five minutes later I was over the pole, just coming into range of the CC's outer transmitters.

"Well, the black sheep return," the CC began in a superior tone. "I must say you outlasted the usual Nearside stay, in fact..."

"Shut *up!*" I bawled. "You shut up and listen to me. I want to contact Carnival, and I want her *now*, crash priority, emergency status. Get on it!"

The CC was all business, dropping the in *loco parentis* program and operating with the astonishing speed it's capable of in an emergency. Carnival was on the line in three seconds.

"Fox," she said, "I don't want to start this off on a bad footing; so, first of all, I thank you for giving me a chance to settle this with you face-to-face. I've retained a family arbiter, and I'd like for us to present our separate cases to him on this Change you want, and I'll agree to abide by his decision. Is that fair for a beginning?" She sounded anxious. I knew there was anger beneath it — there always is — but she was sincere.

"We can talk about that later, Mom," I sobbed. "Right now you've got to get to the field, as quick as you can."

"Fox, is Halo with you? Is she all right?"

"She's all right."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

It was too late, of course. Old Lester had died shortly after I lifted off, and Halo had been there with a dead body for almost two hours.

She was calm about it. She held Carnival and me together while she explained what had to be done, and even got us to help her. We buried him, as he had wanted, on the surface, in a spot that would always be in the light of Old Earth.

Carnival never would tell me what she would have done if he had been alive when we got there. It was an ethical question, and both of us are usually very opinionated on ethical matters. But I suspect we agreed for once. The will of the individual must be respected, and if I face it again, I'll know what to do. I think.

I got my Change without family arbitration. Credit me with a little sense; if our case had ever come up before a family arbiter, I'm sure he would have recommended divorce. And that would have been tough, because difficult as Carnival is, I love her, and I need her for at least a few more years. I'm not as grown-up as I thought I was.

It didn't really surprise me that Carnival was right about the Change, either. In another lunation

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A CHANGE OF HOBBIT

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I was male again, then female, male; back and forth for a year. There's no sense in that. I'm female now, and I think I'll stick with it for a few years and see what it's about. I was born female, you know, but only lasted two hours in that sex because Carnival wanted a boy.

And Halo's a male, which makes it perfect. We've found that we do better as opposites than we did as boyfriends. I'm thinking about having my child in a few years, with Halo as the father. Carnival says wait, but I think I'm right this time. I still believe most of our troubles come from her inability to remember the swiftly moving present a child lives in. Then Halo can have her child — I'd be flattered if she chose me to father it — and...

We're moving to Nearside. Halo and me, that is, and Carnival and Chord are thinking about it, and they'll go, I think. If only to shut up Adagio.

Why are we going? I've thought about it a long time. Not because of old Lester. I hate to speak unkindly of him, but he was inarguably a fool. A fool with dignity, and the strength of his convictions; a likable old fool, but a fool all the same. It would be silly to talk of "carrying on his dream" or some of the things I think Halo has in mind.

But, coincidentally, his dream and mine are pretty close, though for different reasons. He couldn't bear to see the Nearside abandoned out of fear, and he feared the new human society. So he became a hermit. I want to go there simply because the fear is gone for my generation, and it's a lot of beautiful real estate. And we won't be alone. We'll be the vanguard, but the days of clustering in the Farside warrens and ignoring Old Earth are over. The human race came from Earth, and it was ours until it was taken from us. To tell the truth, I've been wondering if the aliens are really as invincible as the old stories say.

It sure is a pretty planet. I wonder if we could go back?

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In which a parallel between war and theater is carried to a logical and frightening conclusion.

Curtains

by GEO. ALEC EFFINGER

It seemed to Sgt. Weinraub that they only had two kinds of weather on the battlefield. Sometimes it was unbelievably cold, so that the ragged little troupe huddled beneath torn blankets and tried to thaw its bandaged fingers with warm cups of thin coffee. Just as often it was blisteringly hot, and the weight of the rifle alone was enough to drive a soldier crazy. On the endless marches beneath the fiery sun the soldiers dropped pieces of equipment to lighten their burden; their trail could easily be followed, as one essential item after another was discarded in the dust. Then later, when the weather grew suddenly icy, the men cursed themselves for losing the very things that might keep them alive. There was never any moderate climate; it was either cold or very, very hot.

Today it was sweltering beneath the blazing sun. The seventy-five men were resting in the scant shade of a few stumpy trees. Weinraub looked at them for a moment. They leaned against the gnarled trunks wearily, eyes shut, faces shiny with sweat, beards black, mouths open. No one talked. No one smoked or laughed. They all sat there, panting in the heat, waiting for Weinraub to order them to fall in. He was in no hurry, himself. But they had a mission to accomplish.

Sergeant First Class Steve Weinraub was trying to put up a good front for the men. The command had fallen to him suddenly, and he hadn't adjusted to the responsibility yet. But that made no practical difference at all. He was expected to perform as though he had been trained for the job. He walked over to one of the men. "I want to talk with you, Corporal Staefler," he said.

The man looked up. He said nothing. Weinraub sighed and sat

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down in the dirt next to Staefler. "I'm going to hand you some of my old duties," said the sergeant. "Now that I have to look after all seventy-five of you, I don't have the time anymore."

"Sure," said Staefler flatly. "Like what?"

Weinraub slipped out of his pack's harness and rummaged among his personal effects. He brought out a small black book. "This is the company record book. I want you to carry it from now on. You can seen how I've been working it. Just keep track of the reviews, paste them in, make the appropriate notes. It doesn't take that much time, but I just don't want to be bothered." Staefler took the book, looking past Weinraub, still too exhausted to waste energy talking. "I got the new *Stars and Stripes* here," said Weinraub. "Why don't you cut out the review on our next rest stop?"

"What did they say?"

Sgt. Weinraub turned the pages until he found the right place. "'On The Home Front,'" read the sergeant. "'By Brig. Gen. Robert W. Hanson.'"

"Hanson!" said Staefler. "How did we rate him? I didn't think he bothered to notice us poor slobs."

"He was right out there, last time," said Weinraub. "*I* saw him. I figure Lt. Marquand must have heard ahead of time."

Staefler spit into the dust. "Yeah," he said softly. "I wish I'd known."

"'And then there's Delta Company,'" said Weinraub, continuing to read from the magazine, "'a rather shabby troupe seemingly dedicated to defending our borders in the tritest ways imaginable. This week, in preparation for the first great offensive of the war, rumored to be a massive invasion of the European enemy's homeland, Delta Company attempted to consolidate its gains of the previous months. There was no secret about the importance of this performance. But, for some reason, the company dragged out the oldest, silliest ploy known to modern warfare. Dressed in civilian clothes, the company divided itself into two equal "gangs" and staged a sort of teen-age street fight. I don't know about my colleagues, but I myself have grown excessively weary of such tired examples of low-level creativity.'"

"Uh, oh," said Staefler. "Sounds like he didn't like us."

"Yeah," said Weinraub. "'The farce continued in predictable fashion until the company's senior officer, Lt. Rod Marquand, cried out against the injustice of the soldier's fate and threw himself on an opponent's switchblade knife. Although the stunned look on the face of the poor soldier holding the

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blade was worth a few minutes of the tedious exhibition, Marquand's cheap tactic destroyed whatever tiny shred of interest the performance may have generated. When will we have enough of sordid emotionalism and such sensational novelties as Marquand's? I suspect not until the officers responsible have learned to their dismay the results they may earn; we can hope these officers will take heed from Marquand's poor example, but I fear that's asking too much. We shall see.'"

"I want to know something," said Staefler. "You're telling me that Lt. Marquand got himself killed to save us, and this idiot Hanson is saying it was all for nothing?"

Weinraub closed the magazine and handed it to the other man. "Seems like it."

"And now you're in charge?"

Weinraub nodded. That was the same question he kept asking himself.

"I know what you better not do," said Staefler bitterly. "You better not throw yourself on any bayonets."

"Right," said Sgt. Weinraub. "Okay, men," he called. "Fall in."

Over a year before, when the war first began, Weinraub and others like him had been very excited. He could remember the declaration itself with strange clarity. The Representative of North America had appeared on television one evening after dinner. There had been no advance notice. The situation comedy rerun had ended, the station had played a couple of commercials, and then the handsome face of the Representative filled the screen. Weinraub had glanced across the room at his wife, who was sewing. "Hey," he said. "It's the Representative." She had looked up and smiled, but otherwise had shown no interest in what the Representative had to say.

"Good evening, my fellow citizens of North America," he said. "I come before you tonight to make an announcement that will affect you all and to explain the situation so that you may understand the reasons behind my decision. As of midnight tonight, New York time, the North American people will be officially at war with the people of Europe. It has been many years since our two great continents have engaged in such a conflict, but nevertheless I feel that you will all support me now and come to the defense of our noble land."

The next morning the newspapers reported plans for the first draft call for the North American Havoc Forces since the end of the African war, six years before. Seized by the powerful patriotic spirit, Weinraub had not waited to

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be called. He was proud to be the first citizen of his tiny Pennsylvania hometown to enlist. In the months since then he had distinguished himself in a modest way, enough to warrant promotion to Sergeant First Class. And now, with the fruitless death of Lt. Marquand, Weinraub found himself in command of an increasingly discontented force. He understood that the North American invasion of Europe could be adversely affected, even ruined, by the performance of his Delta Company. But he didn't like to think about that.

The Delta Company was only one small theater of operations, of course. But one couldn't hide form the critical gaze of the Representatives. Even though the little band of soldiers thought themselves isolated and ineffectual, so mythic a figure as General Hanson had been assigned to observe one of their actions. Weinraub had no idea if Hanson would be there again in four days, when Delta Company was scheduled for another. He thought about the review and prayed that someone out of the NAHF would be sent.

The column marched slowly, shuffling through the dry dust of the road. The sun was going down at last, but the heat did not abate. When it got too dark, Weinraub called a halt, and the men moved off the trail to make camp for the night. He threw his own things down next to Staefler.

"You got any ideas yet?" asked the corporal.

"Yeah, I'm working on something. Nothing definite. Nothing I want to talk about yet."

"You'd think the NAHF guys would give us a break," said Staefler, still burning over the bad notice Lt. Marquand's sacrifice had received. "I mean, we're on the same side."

"I don't think so," said Weinraub. In the light of the campfire he could see that Staefler was giving him a quizzical look. The sergeant hurried to explain. "Well, look," he said. "Sometimes we get an African attache assigned to review us, sometimes an Asian, sometimes even a European. And they're the enemy. But they're all answerable to their particular Representative, and those guys are a lot rougher on their juniors than you think. The military liaison fellows have an awful short life span unless they play clean. As a matter of fact, we can usually count on worse treatment from one of our own than from some neutral power. That way the Representatives won't think the NAHF man is favoring us."

"And the whole system works fine," said Staefler. "But only as long as the Representatives are honest. What do they get out of it?

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I could never understand that. They must have some kind of deal worked out. And if the Representatives aren't on the level, what we're doing is really kind of pointless."

"Shut up, corporal," said Weinraub sharply.

"Sorry, Sarge." Staefler spit into the dust again and moved away from the fire. A couple of the privates waited until Staefler had gone, then moved into the circle of firelight.

"We heard about Lt. Marquand's review," said one of the men. "We were wondering if it was true."

"Yeah, Nicholl," said Sgt. Weinraub. "*Stars and Stripes* didn't seemed too thrilled."

Another man tossed a few branches into the fire. "Was it really Gen. Hanson that wrote the review?"

"Yeah. He's one of the *new* critics. I don't really know what they want."

"We better find out some way," said the second man. "Any idea what's going to happen with the Evaluation?"

"Not yet," said Weinraub. "Lt. Marquand had a fine record going until that idiot Hanson spoiled it. The Evaluations have been pretty good to us. We haven't lost that many men, and the NAHF has gained a lot of ground on our account. This one flop shouldn't hurt us too bad."

"Maybe if we look at what's happening on the other fronts, we can get a better notion of what they want," said Nicholl.

"I don't know," said Sgt. Weinraub. "Some South American company did the Battle of Maldon thing. You know, a losing cause but loyal warriors, fighting to the last man to avenge the death of their stupid leader. I would have figured that would really tickle the audience, the whole company of them going out in a huge blaze of glory. But the review just said something about 'pyrotechnic nonsense.' They want simple basic stuff these days. The tear-jerkers aren't getting points anymore."

"I heard where South America is really losing," said a third soldier. "Asia managed to wipe out most of the Brazilian coast a couple of months ago, and the SAHF is going all out. They wasted that whole company for a major retaliation, but I guess it didn't work out."

"Asia killed off the Brazilian coast?" asked Nicholl. "I didn't know about that. I was just down there about four years ago."

"From what I hear, you won't be able to go back there for a while," said Weinraub. "It's going to be a long time before it cools down."

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"What about Africa?" asked the second man.

"Nothing for sure," said Weinraub. "Rumors are that Africa's going to declare against Asia. That would be good news for South America."

"I don't know that they'd be much good," said Nicholl. "We took care of most of Africa's bigger production companies seven years ago."

Sgt. Weinraub stood up, his cramped legs aching. "You got to remember that the Representatives try to keep their own domains in the running," he said. "The Representative of Africa is as shrewd as any of them."

"Yeah," said the second soldier, "and I bet they all got some kind of helping-hand fund to dip into."

"That's pretty rotten talk," said Weinraub. "I'm tired of hearing you idiots going on like that. It shows a lack of discipline. Lt. Marquand was a good officer. He didn't allow that kind of thinking, and I won't, either."

There were a few mumbled replies of "Yes, Sarge", but Weinraub paid little attention. He was looking for Staefler. The new action had to be planned, and the necessary material requisitioned. He found Staefler sitting among a group of men, all arguing about the death of Lt. Marquand.

"Corporal," said Weinraub, "would you come here for a minute? We have less than four days now, and I want you to help me go over the outline."

"All right," said Staefler. He stood and followed the sergeant to where a couple of privates were setting up the senior officer's tent.

"Sit down," said Weinraub. "I wish these guys would finish putting up the HQ already. Never mind, we can talk here. Frankly, I want your advice. I've never planned an entire action by myself; it's also no secret that you're the most talented man in the company, now that Lt. Marquand's dead."

"Thank you, Sarge," said Staefler. "I'm pleased you feel that way."

"Not at all. But it does load certain responsibilities on you. The rest of these soldiers don't really have much to worry about. A couple of them win parts in each action, but every time there's less to choose from. Do you follow me? Every one of us *wants* to be used. I mean, that's why we're here. We all want to give the best performance we're capable of; otherwise the EHF will crush North America, and then there'll be no stopping them. But the commanding officer has it a whole lot harder. He has to compromise between spending all his talent on one big action and reserving material for the next one.

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And most of all, he has to exercise judgment in choosing his own role."

"You making a dig at Lt. Marquand?" asked Staefler angrily.

"No, no. I was just trying to say that I have to play an active and important part, but still keep myself able to continue in command. It's a very critical job of planning."

"I think the best thing now is to play it conservative," said Staefler. "It's pretty clear that the brass isn't looking for the kind of stuff we were giving them at the beginning of the war."

"Yeah, right," said Weinraub. "Straight out of Clausewitz. He always hated the kind of complicated stratagems our newer officers are so crazy about. Clausewitz said the best thing was just to hit the enemy in the face, hard."

"Hanson's bunch of critics is going back to old-fashioned themes," said Staefler thoughtfully. "We have to come up with something traditional. Make it short and simple. When I was in school, my coaches never stopped telling me that the professional athlete needs concentration, total commitment, and good form. The guys that don't make it are looking for easy ways around the hard work."

"All right," said Weinraub. "Instead of trying to burn out the observers' mind with a flash of brilliant footwork, let's come up with something nice and substantial." The two men chatted while the privates completed putting up the company headquarters. Then they went into the tent and began drawing up the first outline of the action.

The next morning, as Weinraub was eating his spare field rations, a soldier called into the tent that a command jeep was approaching along the road.

"Thanks, Private," said Sgt. Weinraub, hurriedly putting on his trousers and buttoning his tunic. "That has to be the brass with the Evaluation of our last action. Have the men police the area. I don't want a prejudiced audience for the next one." He felt a tightening in his stomach, a fearful anticipation of what the Evaluation would say. He knew that at the same moment a copy of the Evaluation was being presented to the staff of the Representative of North America. All of the NAHF, in effect, was waiting anxiously with him.

He stepped out of the tent, into the torrid sun. The men were frantically trying to give the place an organized appearance, but the jeep was already rattling to a halt on the dusty track beside the camp. Weinraub took a deep breath and walked toward the waiting officers.

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Before he had gone halfway, the sergeant realized that Gen. Hanson himself was waiting in the jeep. Weinraub suddenly felt lightheaded; he wasn't sure that he could put on a cool show now, knowing what kind of an Evaluation he could expect. He took another breath, saluted, and presented himself to the officers.

"Sergeant First Class Weinraub, acting commanding officer of Delta Company," he said, his mouth dry and his head still buzzing.

General Hanson returned his salute. "I've admired your work, Sgt. Weinraub," he said. "I've had the pleasure of following Delta Company for several months now, though I've only actually reviewed one of your actions."

"Will you be reviewing us again, sir?"

Hanson gave him a quick smile. "it's against our policy to advise the troupes along those lines, but, yes, I'll be writing the notices for your next action. That's three days from now, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. We hope you like it, sir."

"I do, too," said the general, giving Weinraub a piercing look. Even though Hanson was compelled to be impartial, it was clear that he was still a superior officer in the NAHF, and his private desires were in no way affected by his public duties. He reached into his tunic and took out a sealed red envelope. "Here is the Evaluation of Lt. Marquand's last action. I want you to study it. I want you to realize the importance of what you're doing and take the appropriate precautions. Use your judgment, and use your good taste. I'm confident we won't have any more mistakes from this company. All of North America is counting on you." The general's driver started the jeep's engine at a signal from Hanson, and Weinraub took the envelope and saluted. He stood in place while the jeep's wheels spat gravel and dust, then clattered away down the road. He tore a strip from the side of the red envelope and slipped out the Evaluation sheet, meanwhile walking slowly back to the tent. When he got there he lay on the folding bunk and read the paper.

"Sgt. Weinraub?" 'it was Cpl. Staefler.

"Come in, Corporal. Hear the bad news."

Staefler entered the tent and sat in the single camp chair by the bunk. "How bad is it?"

"You remember how Fox Company made some terrific coup and won a staging area in the south of England?"

"That was two or three months ago, right?"

"Yeah," said Weinraub. "We

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really needed it; without it we wouldn't be able to launch any kind of attack. We had to get on the offensive. Well, not only did the Europeans recapture that staging outpost, but three flights of long-range bombers got through the aerial defenses and wiped out Baltimore, Washington, and Charleston, South Carolina."

Staefler stared for several seconds, stunned by the harshness of the Evaluation. "They got *Washington?*" he said at last.

"That's not so bad," said Weinraub wearily. "The NAHF had twenty-four hours' notice, and everything important was evacuated. What really hurts is the loss of the English base. We're right back where we were a year ago. The Europeans are taking their time, knocking out our cities one by one, and we haven't had the first shot at hitting them on their own ground."

"It's really up to us to get that base back, then," said Staefler.

"Yeah, we got to make it good. An advisory note in the Evaluation reported that some European troupe did an awful fine job in an action a few days ago, and when they get evaluated, we may be in for a real tough time."

"There's at least three guys in the company from Baltimore and Washington. It'll be hard telling them the news. Especially since they still haven't gotten over the rotten review Lt. Marquand got. They all respected him. He was the damn best officer I ever knew."

"Look, do me a favor. Find out which of our men had families in those cities, and send them in to me. With the lieutenant gone, that's another ugly thing I have to do." Staefler gave him a sympathetic grin, turned, and left the tent. Weinraub was lost in thought until another corporal called in to ask if the men should be formed up for the day's march.

"No, thank you, Corporal," said Weinraub. "We'll be staying here for a while longer. Let the men relax. I think I want to begin shaping up the new action." He was interrupted again a short time later by the men affected by the European raid. He handled the difficult task and dismissed the shocked soldiers with a few words of condolence. Then he went back to the job of devising a simple and effective action.

About noon, Weinraub left the tent to find Cpl. Staefler. The men were engaged in various improvised recreations: baseball, boxing, or just plain loafing. Staefler was standing in a circle around two huge soldiers, both of them naked to the waist and trading punches to the cheers of their fellows. Weinraub touched the corporal on the shoulder. Staefler immediately began to break up the fight,

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thinking that Weinraub disapproved. "No, don't interrupt them," said the sergeant. "Come on, I want you to hear what I've planned."

"Is it done?"

"Just about," said Weinraub. "If you help me put the finishing touches on it, we'll have almost three days to prepare. That's about thirty-six hours more than usual. There won't be any excuse for a foul-up."

"Great, but what can I do?"

Weinraub pulled a dead branch from one of the twisted trees as he passed. He was silent for several seconds, dragging the stick in the dirt and trying to frame what he wanted to say. "You know as well as I do that you're the best of the lot, Bo," he said finally. "There isn't time for modesty. If we don't do a first-class job this time out, the invasion may never get going, and who knows what the Representatives will award to the Europeans. This is going to be your show. I have to lead from strength, and you're it."

Staefler was stunned. "Look, Sergeant, don't get me wrong. I've been nearly bursting for months now, waiting for Lt. Marquand to let me carry the ball. I knew I could do one hell of good job. But now I'm not so sure. It's not that I'm afraid of what it means personally. I don't suppose any of us are, really. But this is such a *big* thing...." His words faded away; the two men stopped along the side of the road, and Weinraub studied the corporal intently.

"It's not just for me," he said. "It's not even for all the other guys in the company. And it goes further than just this one crummy theater of operations. We got to do it for Lt. Marquand. So he didn't die for nothing."

"When you start the locker-room pep talk, I know you're desperate," said Staefler, grinning. "I can't say how much I'm glad for the chance. It's just that I'm not sure I can stand this kind of pressure."

Weinraub clapped the other man on the shoulder. "I've thought it all out, Bo," he said. "there isn't another soldier in the troupe that I can trust on this one."

Staefler shook his head. "Yeah, well, we'll see," he said. "What's it going to be?"

"I figure World War II. It's clean, direct, and there's a lot going for it as far as audience identification. It will be a simple demolitions job, an ambush, and a single act of heroism. You'll have a sort of long solo at the climax. I stole the idea from a movie."

"All right. I didn't wan't to say anything to you before, but I thought World War II was the best choice. Made up a list of supplies?"

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"Yeah," said Weinraub. "Come on back to the HQ tent, and I'll give it to you. Get on the phone and have the stuff sent out as soon as possible. We need a good river with at least one bank wide enough for the action and the audience. NAHF Dispatch has two full days to find us one around here; so we may even get a rehearsal in."

"That would be nice for a change," said Staefler, more confidently.

Later that day the list of equipment, uniforms, and weapons was radioed to the NAHF depot. Weinraub was informed that the nearest suitable river was some three hundred miles away; the trucks would arrive about noon of the following day, and the company would arrive at the site in the late afternoon or evening. They would have only a couple hours of daylight to sketch out the positions for the action and a little time the next morning before the audience began to arrive. It was unfortunate that the river was so far away, but Sgt. Weinraub had wisely written a simple scenario that had no complicated movements. Only Staefler had to understand his part perfectly. If he performed well, the whole action would be an impressive success. And Staefler was the best soldier in the company.

When the trucks and the material arrived the following day, Weinraub called his men together to explain the action. "I'm going to split you up now," he said. "Fall in in a straight line and count off by threes." After the soldiers had done so, he detailed the men numbered one or three to be Americans, and all the number twos to be German soldiers. This put the American forces about twice that of the mock-Nazis, fifty to twenty-five. The troupe changed into the appropriate uniforms supplied by the NAHF quartermaster corps, loaded the American equipment into the American trucks, the German equipment into the German trucks, and climbed into the remaining space for the long drive to the river.

Weinraub and Staefler were both German soldiers, dressed in the field-green trousers and jacket, high black boots, and peaked cap of officers in the Nazi *Waffen-SS*. They rode in a light open Volkswagen personnel carrier, with one of the other members of the company as driver.

It was after eight o'clock when the company got to the chosen site. Weinraub got out of the Volkswagen jeep and walked slowly down to the bank of the river with Staefler. "This is fine, Bo," said the sergeant. "We'll camp on this side tonight. The American troops will go on ahead; there's supposed to be a bridge a little over ninety

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miles further downstream. I'll run through the plan with them now and synchronize our watches. Then they'll leave to take their positions. After that, it'll all be up to you and me."

The American forces consisted of three regular transport vehicles and two jeep command cars. They were well on their way before darkness fell, and Weinraub gathered the remainder of his men, all dressed in the field uniforms of the *Waffen-SS* or regular Army, some wearing the insignia of the Combat and Construction Engineers. "All right, listen up," he said. "The first thing, the important thing we have to do is throw a light bridge across the river here. The water is just under eighty-two feet wide. We've got plenty of authentic bridging equipment; so the only problem is going to be time. We may have to work right through the night and give the performance tomorrow on little or no sleep. I'm sorry. If NAHF Dispatch could have found us a suitable site a little closer, we could have had more time to plot out the action. Never mind.

"In the back of one of the trucks are a couple of dozen eight-foot sections of the *Leichte Z Brucke.* These are portable steel sections which are joined in two parallel rows across the river and then connected by a wooden platform roadbed which is also cut into sections in one of the trucks. We're going to need to improvise supporting stanchions where the *Brucke* units meet. That's twenty-two junctions. Siekewicz, I want you to pick ten men and take care of that. Meanwhile, I want to meet with Cpl. Staefler, Pvt. Wilson, Pvt. Segura, and Cpl. Leskey. The rest of you start working. Cpl. Naegle's had experience with this type of operation; so while I'm busy in my meeting, he'll be in charge."

The troupe worked strenuously, far into the night. By the time Weinraub had finished his conference, the bridge extended almost halfway across the river. Men waded chest-deep in the black moon-sparkled water, securing the Z sections to short pillars constructed of rock and sturdy tree limbs. After the sections had been laid across the water, there would remain only the simple task of putting down the roadway and fastening it with light girders. The whole job ought to be completed before four a.m.; Weinraub was satisfied.

"Is there going to be any problem?" asked Staefler nervously. "I mean, you said you got the idea from a movie."

"That's never been any trouble at all," said Sgt. Weinraub. "The critical staff doesn't care where we get our source material, as long as

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the action is carried out with skill and integrity."

"I'll bet your mother would kill you, if she could see you now."

Weinraub looked startled. "What the hell do you mean?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Staefler quickly. "I mean, just that you're all dressed up like some Nazi butcher. And with a name like Weinraub, too."

"I see what you're getting at. No, my parents were Lutherans."

"I didn't mean anything by it," said Staefler. "I don't know. I guess I'm just trying to work off some of this stage fright."

"Sure. Come on, let's see if anybody's got the coffee going."

The bridge inched its way across the river, and, at last, it reached the other side and was secured to the opposite bank. While the men, stripped to the waist, exhausted now by their labors, fastened down the sections of roadbed, Weinraub ordered the company's three demolitions experts to place explosive charges along the length of the bridge.

"Are we going to blow the thing up tomorrow?" asked Pvt. Wilson.

"If everything goes well, we will," said Weinraub. "I want the charges wired in series, so that one push on the plunger will set off the entire length of bridge. After you men finish that, we can turn in."

"Thank God," said Cpl. Leskey. The soldiers set to work, and the tasks of laying the roadway and secreting the explosives were finished within the hour. Sgt. Weinraub congratulated his men and let them get some sleep, knowing that the inspection group would arrive right on time the next morning.

It was only nine o'clock when Weinraub was awakened by the sound of the jeeps. They pulled to a stop fifty yards from Delta Company's camp; the reviewing committee walked slowly toward the men, chatting and laughing easily among themselves. Once more Weinraub felt an irrational anger, wondering how those critics would feel if they had to go out and be judged, week after week. Belonging to a combat troupe was hard work. The hours were long and the rewards were few, beyond the knowledge that one was helping the war effort against the Europeans. But the worst thing was the emotional strain of performing. Weinraub could never completely conquer it.

The reviewing committee was setting up folding chairs. Cpl. Staefler, as usual, directed the committee to the best vantage point and assisted in whatever trivial favors the critics required. Weinraub guessed that it was keeping Staefler's mind off his solo.

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Soon it was time for Weinraub to order his men to their places. He gathered the fragment of his company and ran through the general instructions once more. "Above all else," he said, "don't get in the way. I don't want any of you spear carriers ruining the action. If something seems to go wrong, *ignore it.* You may be wrong yourself. Let Cpl. Staefler or myself handle any emergency." He gave Staefler and Segura their special directions and then waved the soldiers to their places. Staefler and Weinraub took a position in a sandbag bunker near the committee's seats. The two *Waffen-SS* officers were armed with M.P. 40 submachine guns and Walther Pistole 38s. With them in the bunker were five sharpshooters, one soldier manning an M.G. 42 machine gun. The other men were scattered about the clearing, some protected by bunkers or foxholes, others sheltered behind stumps and boulders.

Weinraub nodded to one of the privates, who gave the signal by radio to the American forces waiting across the river. In the stillness the sergeant could hear the roar of the transport trucks as they started up. Looking through his field glasses, he soon saw the first of the convoy approaching the river and the bridge. Weinraub took a quick glance behind him; there had been a rumor that the Representative of North America himself might observe this crucial action. A seat had been prepared for him, but it was empty. Gen. Hanson caught Weinraub's eye and nodded grimly. The sergeant returned his gaze to the far side of the river, where the first of the American trucks was rolling onto the bridge.

In a sudden instant of panic, Weinraub swung the glasses to the ignition device, sitting isolated in the middle of the clearing for dramatic effect. The box was small and green, standing up in the mud, its familiar T-shaped firing mechanism making the situation obvious to the observers. He scanned the device through his glasses, but everything seemed to be in order; the wires from the explosive charges were connected properly, he thought. In the matters of armaments and equipment, he had to trust the skill of his engineers. He hoped for his own and Lt. Marquand's sake they hadn't fouled up.

The plan was simple. The Germans would wait until the entire American convoy was on the bridge, then blast it all to pieces. There was a murmur of approval from the reviewing committee. The simple classic idea had gained Weinraub a positive edge. The sergeant smiled to Staefler, who grinned back nervously.

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Suddenly, a shot cracked from one of the German bunkers. A groan went up from the audience, but Weinraub only smiled again. That was Pvt. Segura, firing on schedule. It seemed as though he had revealed the plan prematurely; the American trucks came to a sudden halt in the middle of the bridge. Infantrymen poured from the backs of the vehicle, running out along the bridge and lying flat, searching for the hidden ambushers. Weinraub gave the signal, and the three German machine guns opened fire. Four Americans died immediately. Seeing that, the rest of the Americans sought shelter. The Germans were all safely hidden, and it was the Americans who were caught in a predicament. Sgt. Weinraub shouted to Cpl. Leskey to run out and blow up the bridge. Of course, Leskey knew that he'd never make it. He was proud that Weinraub had chosen him. Before he had gone ten yards, an American marksman had cut him down. The reviewing committee applauded, suddenly realizing the interesting situation Weinraub had developed. It seemed to be a stalemate. If the Germans could somehow destroy the bridge and its occupants, or if the Americans could somehow manage to overrun the Nazi position, the action would be a great debut for Sgt. Weinraub.

Muffled shouts were heard from the bridge. Most of the American soldiers ran back towards the trucks; it seemed that they were going to try and drive across, ignoring the dense storm of shells coming from the German emplacements. Before they achieved their goal, half of the Americans were slain, sprawling horribly on the white wood planking of the bridge. The others tried hastily to pull the bodies of their mates out of the path of the trucks. More Americans were slaughtered. At last they gave up and sprinted for the safety of the trucks. Four American sharpshooters remained at their posts near the end of the bridge to cover their fellows' attack.

Weinraub signaled again. Pvt. Wilson ran out to the ignition box, making perhaps twenty yards before an American bullet ripped through his neck. The trucks had almost reached the end of the bridge. "Now," cried Weinraub, slapping Staefler's back loudly. In the midst of the action, the corporal would have no time to feel anxious. He had a job to do. The idea was for Staefler to race to the box, nearly succeeding, and then be shot by the American snipers. Dying, he would fall over the T-plunger and blast the bridge and the enemy in a last dramatic, heroic gesture.

It worked perfectly. Just before

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he reached the igniter, several rounds of fire caught Staefler, jerking him about like a kite on a string. He clutched his abdomen and looked straight at Weinraub. "The plunger," muttered Weinraub, clenching his fists. Behind him the committee was perfectly still. The trucks were moving, the first one just inching off the bridge onto the bank. "The plunger!" screamed Weinraub. "Fall on the plunger!" Staefler was obviously in great pain. His knees buckled; he knelt in the mud of the clearing, his jaw slack, and stared at the ignition box. At last, just when Weinraub was about to go mad with frustration, he fell over the plunger.

Nothing happened.

Weinraub felt tears on his cheek. Not caring about the bullets whacking into the sandbags, he ran out to Staefler. "You idiot!" he shouted, grabbing the suffering man. "The plunger! Why didn't you push the plunger?"

Staefler stared at him, his eyes half-closed. He still held his lower abdomen, where the tunic was fouled with a rapidly spreading bloody stain. "*Zunden,*" he whispered hoarsely.

"What the hell do you mean, *'Zunden'?*"

A bubble of red froth burst on Staefler's lips and trickled down his chin. Weinraub looked up helplessly. Confused, the American soldiers had stopped their unscheduled progress. The committee was on its feet. The sergeant could see Gen. Hanson already stalking back toward his jeep. "We closed after one performance," said Weinraub bitterly. He dropped Staefler to the ground and knelt by the igniter. One of the soldiers called out to him.

"It's not a plunger," said the soldier. "I don't know, maybe the NAHF made a mistake, or Staefler gave them the wrong order number. It's got a key where it says *Zunden.* You got to turn the key."

"They'll probably wipe us out in an aerial bombardment for this," said Weinraub, sobbing. He picked up the ignition box and turned the key in the *Zunden* socket. The bridge exploded in a boiling orange and black cloud, harmlessly, as all the American vehicles and personnel were by now safely on the German bank. Weinraub stood and looked around him. His men, dressed in Nazi uniforms and American, their expressions showing only despair, all holding their weapons slackly, turned toward him to hear his orders. "We got to keep going, though," said the helpless sergeant. "That's the way it's done. The show's got to go on." Then he savagely kicked the twisted body of Cpl. Staefler.

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UPDATING THE ASTEROIDS

I was on a local morning talk show here in New York City on 1 February 1974, and as I prepared for the taping a few days earlier one of the young ladies in charge said to me, "Oh, it's so exciting, Dr. Asimov, that you knew all about what was going to happen today, sixteen years ago."

"I did?" I said, trying not to show my astonishment, for as a science fiction writer I'm *supposed* to know about the future.

"Yes," she said, "Mike Wallace interviewed you for the New York Post back in 1957 and asked you to predict something about the future and you said that in the future energy would become so hard to get that the government would tell you how warm to keep your house."

"You're kidding!" I said with blank surprise, completely forgetting that I was a science fiction writer who was *supposed* to know the future.

"No, I'm not," she said and showed me a yellowed clipping, and, my goodness, that was exactly what I said back in 1957.

I recovered with some difficulty and said, with as near an approach to benign omniscience as I could manage, "Ah, yes! And is there anything else you would like to know?"

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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Would that my batting average were always so accurate, but it isn't. And would that I could always foresee new scientific discoveries but I can't.

Therefore, every once in a while I feel I ought to update and amplify some earlier essay in this, by now, very long series.* The particular essay I have in mind at the moment is THE ROCKS OF DAMOCLES which appeared in the March 1966 issue of F&SF — over eight years ago.

In that article I mentioned seven "Earth-grazers" — seven asteroids that could approach Earth more closely than any planet did. They were Albert, Eros, Amor, Apollo, Icarus, Adonis, and Hermes. Now, however, helped along by statistics in a delightful article by Brian G. Marsden in the September, 1973 *Sky and Telescope,* I would like to go over the subject again more thoroughly and with a different emphasis.

In any book on astronomy, including those I myself have written, you will find the statement that the asteroid belt is located between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. It is, in the sense, that between those orbits is present the largest concentration of asteroids. But can there be asteroids with orbits carrying them beyond those limits?

Let's begin by considering the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. The orbits of both planets are elliptical, of course, and in both cases the planet has a nearest approach to the Sun (perihelion) and a farthest approach (aphelion) that are distinctly different.

In the case of Mars, the perihelion distance, in millions of kilometers, is 208 and the aphelion distance is 250. For Jupiter, the two figures are 740 and 815.

If we interpret this business of "between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter" at its narrowest, we would expect each asteroid never to recede as far as 740 million kilometers from the Sun (Jupiter's perihelion) or to approach closer than 250 million kilometers to the Sun (Mar's aphelion).

This turned out to be quite true for the first four asteroids discovered: Ceres, Pallas, Juno, and Vesta. The perihelion in millions of kilometers for these four asteroids are, respectively, 380, 320, 300, and 330. The aphelions of the four asteroids are, respectively, 450, 510, 500, and 385. All fall neatly between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter.

Once these four asteroids were discovered, then, the notion that asteroids fall into the Mars-Jupiter gap was firmly established.

Yet suppose there are exceptions. These could be of two types. An

**Don't worry (in case you're worrying, that is), I'm not tired of the series and have no intention of stopping.*

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asteroid might recede beyond Jupiter's orbit, or it might approach within Mar's orbit. (Or, of course, it might do both.)

The possibility of receding beyond Jupiter's orbit is somehow less disturbing psychologically. In the first place, the farther an asteroid, the more difficult it is to see, and an asteroid receding beyond Jupiter's orbit at aphelion might very likely be unusually far away at perihelion, too, and might be difficult to spot. Then, too, distance lends uninterest, and a beyond-Jupiter asteroid would have nothing but statistics to recommend it.

On the other hand, an asteroid with an orbit that brought it within Mar's orbit at any point would be closer to us than asteroids would ordinarily be and would be correspondingly easier to detect. Furthermore, a nearer-than-Mars asteroid would be approaching Earth, and for that very reason would be of devouring interest, whether because of the scientific studies it might make possible, or because of the grizzly chance that it might someday be on a collision course with ourselves.

To be sure, space is enormous even inside the comparatively constricted area of Mars's orbit (constricted as compared with the vast areas through which the outer planets course) and that Earth is tiny by comparison. Then, too, the asteroids and Earth have orbits that tilt to different degrees so that there is still more space available in the third dimension for the hoped-for miss. Nevertheless, any orbit that brings a maverick asteroid close to ourselves is bound to give rise to a certain concern.

Let us, therefore, concentrate on the possibility of asteroids moving within Mars's orbit and penetrating the inner Solar system.

For 72 years after the discovery of the first asteroid, Ceres, everything went in orderly fashion. In that period, 131 asteroids were discovered, and every one of them had a perihelion distance of more than 250 million kilometers and therefore lay beyond Mars's farthest distance.

But then came June 14, 1873, when the Canadian-American astronomer, James Craig Watson, discovered asteroid 132. He named it Aethra (the mother of the Athenian hero, Theseus, in the Greek myths), and when he calculated its orbit, he found that the perihelion was less than 250 million kilometers. Aethra, at perihelion, approached the Sun more closely than Mars's distance at aphelion.

Aethra wasn't much closer than 250. Mars, at perihelion, was closer to the Sun than Aethra ever was. Still, Aethra was at times closer to the Sun than Mars at times was, and that was notable.

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Three hundred more asteroids were discovered over the next quarter-century, and then came August 13, 1898, when Gustav Witt discovered asteroid 433.

Its orbit was a real blockbuster, for its perihelion was at only 170 million kilometers from the Sun, and that was *far* within Mars's orbit. The rule about asteroids orbiting between Mars and Jupiter was broken with a vengeance.

In fact, for the first time in the 97 years since the first asteroid was discovered, it became appropriate to talk about Earth's orbit in connection with asteroids. Earth's perihelion is at 147 million kilometers from the Sun, and its aphelion is at 153 million kilometers.

If the orbits of Earth and of asteroid 433 are plotted in three dimensions, it turns out that the closest approach of the two is 23 million kilometers. In order for the two bodies to approach one another at this distance, each has to be in the particular point in its orbit that is nearest the other. More often than not, when one object is at the correct point, the other is far from it. For that reason, a reasonably close approach comes about only at long intervals.

Still, every once in a while, asteroid 433 does make a pretty close approach, and when it does it is closer to us than any of the large planets of the Solar system. Mars never comes closer to us than 55 million kilometers, and Venus, our closest planetary neighbor, is never closer than 40 million kilometers.

Anything that can approach Earth at a distance of less than 40 million kilometers is therefore called (perhaps a bit over-dramatically) an "Earth-grazer," and asteroid 433 was the first object of this sort to be discovered.

Witt called his new asteroid Eros, after the young god of love, who was the son, in the Greek myths, of Ares (Mars) and Aphrodite (Venus). This was a most appropriate name for an object which moved through space between the orbits of Mars and Venus (at least part of the time). It set the fashion of giving masculine names to all asteroids whose orbits lay, at least in part, within that of Mars, or beyond that of Jupiter, or both.

For thirteen years and nearly three hundred more asteroids, Eros remained in lonely splendor as the only Earth-grazer known. Then in 1911, asteroid 719 was discovered and was found to penetrate within Mars's orbit. It was named Albert, and its perihelion distance was larger than that of Eros so that it can approach Earth no closer than 32 million kilometers.

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Albert was lost after its discovery, a not unusual event. Orbits are not always calculated with sufficient precision during the short time an asteroid can be observed after its initial (usually accidental) sighting, at a moment when it may already be almost out of sight. Then, too, their orbits can be perturbed by the various planets and change slightly. Between lack of precision and possible orbital change, they may not come back in the place and at the time predicted; and they are usually faint enough to be missed *unless* you know in advance when and where they will reappear.

In subsequent years, asteroids 887 (Alinda) and 1036 (Ganymed, with the final "e" missing to distinguish it from Jupiter's large satellite) were found to have orbits very like that of Albert, so the total number of Earth-grazers was raised to four.

In 1931, thirty-three years after its discovery, Eros still held the record for close approach to Earth. In that year, Eros made a close approach, in fact; one of 27 million kilometers; and it was then the object of a large international project, since by measuring its parallax accurately, the scale of the Solar system could be (and was) determined with record precision.

But then, on March 12, 1932, the record was broken when a Belgian astronomer, Eugene Delporte, discovered asteroid 1221 and found that its orbit gave it a perihelion distance of 162 million kilometers from the Sun, 8 million kilometers closer than Eros ever came. Moreover it could approach within 16 million kilometers of Earth, which was considerably less than Eros's close approach of 23 million. Delporte gave asteroid 1221 the name of Amor, which is the Latin equivalent of the Greek Eros.

In my 1966 article, I mentioned Amor and said that it had a diameter of 16 kilometers*. Apparently, that's wrong. According to Marsden, Amor is the faintest of all the asteroids which have been honored with an official number, and it must be somewhat less than 1 kilometer in diameter.

But if Amor, at the time of its discovery, held the record for close approach to the Sun, it held that record for only six weeks. On April 24, 1932, the German astronomer, Karl Reinmuth, discovered an asteroid he named Apollo. It was appropriate to name it after the Greek god of the Sun, for when the orbit was worked out it turned out that this sixth Earth-grazer did not merely penetrate within Mars's orbit as the other five did. It went past the orbit of Earth, too, and even that of Venus, and

**Actually, I said "10 miles" but I'm not using naughty words like miles and pounds any more.*

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ended up on July 7, 1932, at a perhelion point only 97 million kilometers from the Sun. (Venus's nearly circular orbit keeps it 109 million kilometers from the Sun.)

On the night of May 15, 1932, when it happened to be photographed at Yerkes Observatory, Apollo was only 11 million kilometers from Earth and had come closer than any other known deep-space object; except for our own Moon, of course. (I say "deep-space" because meteors come closer still but they are seen only after they are within our atmosphere.)

Apollo is called 1932 HA, meaning that it was the first asteroid (A) to be discovered in the eighth half-month (H) of 1932. Its orbit, as worked out, seemed too uncertain to make it reasonable to suppose it would be seen again, so it was not given a number. And, indeed, it was promptly lost. However, Marsden and his co-workers have located it again in 1973 by making a concerted attempt to look where it might be. (And it was.)

The discovery of Apollo meant there was now a new class of objects, "Apollo objects," which were asteroids that approached more closely to the Sun than the Earth does.

Apollo was the first of the Apollo-objects, but as you might guess, it wasn't the last. In February, 1936, Delporte, who had detected Amor four years earlier, detected another object, perhaps just as small, which he named Adonis, after a well-known love of Aphrodite (Venus). Its official name is 1936 CA and it, too, is less than a kilometer in diameter (whereas Apollo is slightly larger, perhaps one and a half kilometers).

Adonis, despite its small size, was brighter than Amor (and streaked more rapidly through the skies) because it was unusually close to the Earth at the time of its discovery. The calculation of its orbit showed that it had passed 2.4 million kilometers from the Earth a few days before it was detected — just ten times farther than the Moon.

What's more, the astonishing record set by Apollo for perihelion distance was broken, for at its closest approach, Adonis is only 66 million kilometers from the Sun, only two-thirds the distance of either Apollo or the planet, Venus.

Indeed, with Adonis, we can begin talking about the planet Mercury, the closest of all planets to the Sun. Mercury's orbit is more elliptical than that of the other three planets of the inner Solar system. At its perihelion it is 46.5 million kilometers from the Sun but at aphelion it is 70.5 million kilometers from the Sun. This means that Adonis is, at times, closer to the Sun than Mercury is.

Adonis's perihelion record remained for a number of years, but its

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record close approach to Earth did not. In November, 1937, Reinmuth (the discoverer of Apollo) detected a third Apollo-object and named it Hermes. Properly called 1937 UB, Hermes moved across the sky with extraordinary quickness and was gone almost before a stab could be made at calculating its orbit. At its perihelion it was 93 million kilometers from the Sun, a little closer than Apollo.

It turned out, though, that Hermes passed within 0.8 million kilometers of the Earth and, if its orbit was calculated correctly, it was possible for it to miss us by a mere 0.31 million kilometers. It would then pass by us more closely than our own Moon does.

Hermes set a close-approach record that still exists (and that no one is eager to have broken). The only objects that have come closer to Earth than 0.31 million kilometers, that we know of, have *hit* Earth.

Of course, 0.31 million kilometers is 24 times the Earth's diameter and is a decided miss, but asteroids *can* be perturbed into a new orbit and we've lost track of Hermes. It has never been spotted since that 1937 fly-by, and the orbital calculation isn't good enough to make us certain when it will be close enough to see again. It may be spotted again someday, but only by accident, and meanwhile it's flying around in space with the potential of coming awfully close.

If it's any consolation to us (and why should it be?) other planets are also targets. Apollo passed by Venus at a distance of only 1.4 million kilometers in 1950.

In 1948, the German-American astronomer Walter Baade discovered an Apollo object which turned out, in some ways, to be the most unusual asteroid of all. Its orbit was well enough calculated to make it seem worth a number — 1566. Its period of revolution is only 1.12 years, as compared with the typical asteroidal period of 4.6 years for those that are well-behaved enough to remain within the Mars-Jupiter orbital gap.

This means that, on the whole, Icarus's orbit is very little larger than Earth's. Icarus's orbit, however, is much more eccentric than Earth's so that at its aphelion it is farther from the Sun than the Earth is, and at perihelion it is closer.

It is the perihelion that is remarkable, for at that point Icarus is only 28.5 million kilometers from the Sun, less than half the distance of Adonis, the previous record-holder and only about 60 percent of the closest approach Mercury ever makes to the Sun.

It is appropriate that this asteroid be named for the character in the Greek myths who flew too near the Sun, melted the wax holding the

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feathers in his artificial wings, and fell to his death. Nothing we know of ever approaches the Sun more closely than Icarus, except for an occasional comet.

(If you're curious, the comet of 1843, as it swung about the Sun approached to within 0.825 million kilometers of the Sun's center, or within 0.13 million kilometers of its surface. That it survived was owing to the fact that it was moving at the kind of speed that enabled it to swing around the Sun in a little over an hour behind the insulation of the gas and dust that arose out of its evaporating ices — and then to get the devil away from there.)

Icarus's perihelion value has kept the record for the quarter-century since it has been discovered. Nothing else has even come close. It is no record-holder as far as its approach to Earth is concerned. The closest it can come to Earth is 6.4 million kilometers.

In 1951, the French-American astronomer, Rudolph L. B. Minkowski, along with E. A. Wilson, discovered Geographos, which received the number 1620 and had the unusually large diameter for an Apollo-object of about 3 kilometers. Its perihelion distance is about 124 million kilometers, and its closest approach to Earth is about 10 million kilometers.

One other numbered Apollo-object should be mentioned. It was discovered in 1948, but wasn't given a number till it was reobserved by Samuel Herrick of the University of California in 1964. It then received the number 1685 and the name Toro. Toro is even larger than Geographos, about 5 kilometers across. Its perihelion distance is 115 million kilometers and it never comes closer to Earth than 15 million kilometers.

It turned out, however, that Toro's orbit is locked in to that of the Earth. That is, Toro moves out from the Sun and in toward the Sun in an orbit that keeps step with that of Earth; Toro moving around the Sun five times every time Earth moves around eight times.

It is as though Earth and Moon are engaged in a close-held waltz in the center of the ballroom while far at one end, a third person is engaged in an intricate minuet of its own, one that carefully stalks, from a distance, the waltzing couple. Every so often Toro shifts from an Earth-lock to a Venus-lock, and then back to Earth. Its period with Earth is considerably longer than its period with Venus.

Aside from the Apollo-objects mentioned above, eleven other Apollo-objects have been discovered as of mid-1973. Two of them, 1971

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FA and 1971 UA, approach the Sun more closely at perihelion than any other Apollo-objects except for Icarus and Adonis. Another one, 1972 XA is the largest Apollo-object yet detected, with a diameter of perhaps more than 6 kilometers, while 1973 NA has an orbital inclination of 67°, which is something only seen in a cometary orbit.

Encke's comet, which has a perihelion distance of 51 million kilometers (second only to Icarus among the Apollo-objects), has very little haze about itself and also has an apparently compact core. Once all its volatiles are gone, what can we possibly call it but an Apollo-object.

In Table 1 there is a list of the known Apollo-objects, in which I have included for comparison the five innermost planets and Encke's Comet.

Table 1 - The Apollo Objects

Planet	*Apollo-object*	*Perihelion (millions of kilometers)*	*Aphelion (millions of kilometers)*
	Icarus	28.5	300
Mercury		46.5	70.5
	(Encke's Comet)	51	615
	Adonis	66	495
	1971 FA	84	360
	1971 UA	87	240
	Hermes	93	405
	1973 EA	93	435
	Apollo	97	345
Venus		109	109
	Toro	116	300
	P-L 6743	124	360
	Geographos	125	255
	1947 XC	125	555
	1959 LM	125	285
	1950 DA	127	375
	1972 XA	132	435
	1973 NA	133	555
	1948 EA	135	540
	P-L 6344	142	630
Earth		148	152
Mars		208	250
Jupiter		740	815

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As you see from the table, only one Apollo-object, Icarus, comes closer to the Sun than Mercury ever does. Six others in addition, including Adonis, Hermes and Apollo (and Encke's Comet as a seventh, if you want to count it) come closer to the Sun than Venus ever does. Ten others, in addition, including Toro and Geographos, come closer than Earth ever does.

However, don't let that perihelion value fool you completely. None of the Apollo-objects *stays* close. Every single one of the Apollo-objects recedes, on each revolution, beyond the orbits of Mercury, Venus and Earth.

The Apollo-object, 1971 UA, has the smallest aphelion, 240 million kilometers, so that it alone never recedes as far as Mars does. All the other Apollo-objects, however, including even Icarus, recede well beyond Mar's orbits and all are full-fledged members of the asteroid belt at least in the distant portion of their orbits.

No known Apollo-object recedes as far as Jupiter's orbit, however. Even Encke's Comet does not. Encke's Comet is, at all times, well within Jupiter's orbit, and it is the only known comet of which this can be said. All others, without exception have larger orbits and recede beyond Jupiter.

But suppose we consider the average distance of any object from the Sun as roughly equal to half-way between aphelion and perihelion. In that case, if we line up the Apollo-objects in terms of average distance we get Table 2.

What it amounts to is that no Apollo-object, not even Icarus, is as close to the Sun on the average, as even *Earth* is. Only 1971 UA and Icarus approach Earth's mark, and vie for the shortest known period of revolution for any asteroid, a little over 400 days for each.

Five more are slightly less distant from the Sun, on the average, than Mars is, while ten (plus Encke's Comet) are farther from the Sun than Mars is. Not one of them is even half as far from the Sun, on the average, as Jupiter is, though P-L 6344 almost makes it.

Mercury, Venus, and even the Earth and the Moon retain their pride of place as being nearer the Sun on a day-in, day-out basis than any other known object in the Solar system, including even the comets.

And how many more Apollo-objects are there yet undiscovered? The American astronomer, Fred Whipple, suspects that there may be at least a hundred larger than one and a half kilometers in diameter, and it follows that there must be thousands of additional ones that are less than one and

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Table 2 - The Apollo-objects - Average

Planet	*Apollo-object*	*Average distance (millions of kilometers)*
Mercury		58
Venus		109
Earth		150
	1971 UA	163
	Icarus	164
	Geographos	190
	1959 LM	205
	Toro	208
	Apollo	221
	1971 FA	222
Mars		229
	P-L 6743	242
	Hermes	249
	1950 DA	251
	1973 EA	264
	Adonis	280
	1972 XA	283
	(Encke's Comet)	333
	1948 EA	338
	1947 XC	340
	1973 NA	344
	P-L 6344	386
Jupiter		778

a half kilometers across but large enough to do damage if they blunder into us (and perhaps tens of thousands of objects small enough to be no more than an annoyance when they strike).

Every meteoroid that hits us and is large enough to make its way through the atmosphere and strike the ground as a meteorite was an Apollo-object before the collision. Few of them are large enough to be catastrophic, though at least two 20th Century strikes would have been, if kindly Chance had not seen fit to guide them to unpopulated Siberian areas.

Ernst Opik estimates that an Apollo-object should travel in its orbit for

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an average of 100 million years before colliding with Earth. If we suppose that there are 2,000 Apollo-objects large enough to wipe out a city if they strike, then the average interval of time between strikes of any one of these is only 50,000 years.

The Great Meteor Crater in Arizona may have been formed by one of the smaller, but yet sizable, Apollo-objects, and that may have been formed about 50,000 years ago.

Maybe we're due.

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Mr. Bretnor's last story here was "Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh And All," (October 1973) a sparkling account of two time-traveling scholars. Here is a completely different side to Mr. Bretnor's talent, a beautifully told and chilling story about a kind of possession.

Markham

by R. BRETNOR

In my memory, when it summons them involuntarily, the Herries house and Myra Daunton will always live in sunlight, the house glowing in fresh maroon and ocher, towered and fretted and speared with ornamental iron, Myra with her lithe back turned toward me, wearing her broad straw hat and gardening gloves, moving slowly and gracefully against the pastel background of her banked hydrangeas; and this is strange, because San Diego isn't always sunny, and there have been innumerable occasions when I've seen them both through rains and mists and drizzles, or in the thin light of night skies and streetlamps. The house was there when I was born, when my father, proud of his success, bought the white house across the way on Maple Street. While I was growing up, my bedroom window always framed it, as it does today, except that then it was Myra's mother moving there, as today it is...Mark's wife, Mark's widow, whoever she may be.

It was the Herries house. The name never changed, even though the Herries family had daughtered out long since; Myra's grandmother had been the last. They had commemorated their Gold Rush money in the stained glass lunette over their front door: a bearded, red-shirted 'Forty-niner panning yellow gold eternally against golden sunlight. I, who as a boy drank glowing color as other boys drink Coke, I used to find excuses to go and play with Myra so I could look at it. We used to joke about it, and then inevitably the joke began to change its meaning; Myra was growing into a quiet beauty, honey-haired, a tall girl with a long and lovely back that made me ache to reach for it and wake at night with all my body's ardor suddenly alive. Sometimes, when kids grow

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almost brother-sisterly, these things are specially difficult; affection and familiarity, however childish in their origins, weaken our barriers and resistances — and possibly they should. Yet, in the midst of it, she clung to one small formalism — she did not like diminutives, and while I was *Harry* to everybody else, she called me *Henry* always. We played together in grammar school and high school, and later, in the interstices of our college years — for we both went away then, I to Stanford, she to USC — we did everything we could together, swam and went horseback riding, and at night rode the Coronado ferry's swells in Rowing Club canoes, and drove my father's Wills-St.-Claire touring car when I could get it, and danced the nights away. Those were the earliest Twenties, excited in the nervous backwash of the First World War and Prohibition, the seeds of the dark future still dormant, still unseen.

Eventually, of course, we started making love — spontaneously and joyfully, without fear because of our perfect trust in one another, without guilt because of our very deep affection and respect. (And this, indeed, characterized our association over all the years: that there were no unkindnesses between us. No, not one.) She was at once passionate and impulsive, but always with her, in the midst of it, there was a strange hint of amused detachment, piquant and tantalizing. We made love when we could, taking care that comment would never be aroused, and so we seldom slept together: once for a glorious weekend when a classmate lent me a redwood cottage in Carmel and she joined me there, again at someone's ranch house in the hills, that sort of thing. Everyone assumed that we would marry; I was so sure of it that for a long time I left everything unsaid. Then one night at Christmas, just before the last semester of my senior year, I spoke of it when we were close together. She listened to me gravely, and I'm sure she smiled there in the darkness, and then she placed a gentle finger on my lips, and very softly said, "Henry, not now, not now," and kissed me into silence. Everything was unchanged, and so it stayed all through the summer following; and after that, while she remained at home, I went away again to law school.

Actually, our making love was spaced over only a little more than a year, and, looking back, I now can ask myself why during it I failed even to try to understand her depths and her complexities — probably because I simply felt no need to. I did not see, then, that her sweet pliancy and gentleness overlay an inborn, and I suppose unconscious, sense of purpose, of

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life's pattern, of what was to be her self-made destiny, and that it was a scheme into which I simply did not fit, not in the role for which I'd cast myself. When we were separated, we seldom wrote, except for brief, gay notes conveying chitchat, telling scraps of news, arranging dates.

Therefore I was shocked and dazed and hurt, late in the autumn of that year, to receive my first long, serious letter from her — a sweet letter, a letter anesthetic in its gentleness, a true love-letter — to tell me she was going to marry Cabell Daunton. She did not tell me why. She did not say she was in love with him. She simply said that it was for the best — a curious choice of phrase, which she left unexplained — and that she knew that I, her lover and her oldest friend, would understand, and that we'd love each other as we had always done.

The strangest thing, I think, is that we did. After my first bitter pang of jealousy, after the pain of that first stab into the vitals of my pride, all pain dissolved and I could think no ill of her. Nor, when I finally met him, could I resent Daunton. He was a tall, heavily handsome man who had flown briefly in the war, ten years older than either she or I, with a vaguely Southern accent and fine manners. Quite obviously, he was in love with her. Obviously, too, he loved the Herries house, cherishing it with an air of intimate belongingness which, seeing it in him, I recognized now as always part of her. I liked him, and he liked me. The three of us came together naturally, without embarrassment. Something wonderful had ended, that was all, and something very different, but perhaps equally as good, had just begun. Myra introduced me to a college friend of hers, Judith Ortega, dainty and dark, half Spanish-Californian, as different from her as night is from day, who had a year left to graduation and was going to do it at UC in Berkeley. The four of us went out together several times, to friends' houses, to the Hotel del Coronado, or wherever, usually in Daunton's very special PierceArrow sport phaeton, which he drove too fast but very expertly, and of which he was inordinately proud.

They were married not long afterwards, and Judith and I traveled down together by train for the wedding, and Myra's parents gave her a really spendid present — the Herries house. Her father had decided to retire; they were going to take a trip around the world; they would come back to an apartment. Myra and Cabell honeymooned at home, and I don't think that during the four years of their married life they ever left the house for more

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than a day or so. They must have been completely happy there. Sixteen months after the wedding, Mark was born — Markham Herries Daunton — and I remember reflecting a little ruefully how very near I had come to being his father. Then finally I finished law school and passed my bar exams and married Judith and brought her back with me to San Diego. My parents couldn't afford to be as generous as Myra's had, but they converted our big old house into two flats and let us have the top one until, as they said, "I was established." So I joined the firm of one of father's friends and settled down to practice, and Judith and I and Myra and her husband were close friends once again, going out together, entertaining in and out of each others' houses. From the beginning, Judith and I often took care of Mark when they went out, and it was then that I began to take the avuncular interest in him which ultimately became almost a paternal one. Because when Mark was barely three, Cabell Daunton, driving his car much too fast down Torrey Pines grade at night, swerved to avoid a solid-tired Model T farm truck traveling at twelve miles an hour without lights — the roads had plenty of them in those days — and lost control, plunging down too far to contemplate. He was killed instantly.

Myra withdrew abruptly after Cabell died, not into herself — it would not be quite accurate to say that — but into the companionship and shelter of her house. It was not that she shut out the world, for she still saw her friends, was entertained, and entertained them. But somehow she seemed to wrap the house protectively around her, as an old woman in cold weather wraps a shawl. She never was without it, without the thought of it; if she was not, in daylight, attending to its garden, its trees, its dress parade repair, then it was with her in her conversation, sharing with Mark her preoccupations and anxieties. She leaned on us at first. She leaned on me because I was her oldest and most trusted friend, because we had been lovers. She leaned on Judith in her immediate vulnerability. And Judith understood; together we did our best, as we then thought, to carry her along, even then not comprehending the unbending strength, the unrelenting force, the sheer unbreakability which were the very essence of her being.

In some ways, it was a strange environment in which her Mark grew up. Even in the Twenties, the neighborhood was changing rapidly. A few old families maintained their dignified late-Victorian houses, keeping them brave with paint and carefully

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gardened, but many more moved out to build in Mission Hills, and most of the old places either had been changed over into boarding houses of varying reputation and respectability or chopped into apartments, and a few, allowed to fall into decay, had finally been murdered by the wreckers. Myra ignored it all, continuing as though she and the Herries house were all alone in the secure enclave of another age. Money was not among her problems. Of Cabell's several business interests, the most promising and prosperous had been a firm of ship chandlers and yacht brokers, and this she'd had the hard good sense to keep — always competently managed, for she was usually a good judge of men and their abilities. Even during the Depression, when most of us at least had had to tighten up, she always had her Japanese gardener-and-houseman, her Scandinavian or Midwestern cook-housekeeper, and sometimes a maid. On fine days, she usually spent her morning hours with the Japanese, helping him, telling him what she wanted done, following his almost unintelligible instructions. (Actually, there was a succession of them, each elderly, each seemingly an incarnation of his predecessor, lasting until Franklin Roosevelt imported concentration camps into America.)

That, as I said, is how she comes to mind: her wide straw hat, her gardening gloves, her pruning shears, the beauty of her figure and how she moved. She was still only twenty-seven when Cabell died, and we were sure she would marry again before too long — she simply was too beautiful, too warm, and too alive to stay alone. The only question in our minds was to whom, and when.

But the years passed, and Mark grew in stature and in strength, and she did not marry. She may have had affairs; I just don't know. Certainly, there were men enough around, some after her money, some almost desperately interested in her alone. None lasted long. She introduced them; we did our best to guess her wants and her intentions, inviting them, making things easy for them; but they were all dismissed — and there was one thing she would tolerate from none of them: any attempt to play the father, to get close to Mark. That role was mine. She never asked me to assume it; she just assumed from the beginning that I would. Judith and I were childless, and Judith took him to her heart, urging me on when I began to teach him the things a man should teach a boy: how to take risks which men must take — and do it sensibly, how to shoot accurately and safely, and ride and fish and sail a boat. I

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helped to introduce him to the world of books, first of vicarious travel and adventure, then gradually of poetry and more abstract thought. I opened up to him the world of adult men, of gunsmiths and Italian fishermen and stablehands and odd old antique dealers, men neither perfect nor entirely bad, whom he could listen to, and learn from, and learn to judge. And I tried to show him that there are things you do and do not do simply for your soul's sake.

In telling it, of course, I have compressed the years, suggesting a continuity which wasn't always there, for our association was naturally more intermittent than that of a true father and his son, much more dependent — especially in his school years — on both our schedules. But he was with us a great deal, either at our house or in the open air with me, and in many ways I became closer to him than a father might have been. There were no lingering resentments from early discipline involved, no familial jealousies. Sometimes I was stern uncle, sometimes kindly pseudo-grandfather, and always friend.

He grew tall, like his father, but his hair and features were so clearly Myra's that people sometimes took him for a younger brother. She was devoted to him, and he to her, but always there was a distance one could feel. It was a time when psychologists were arguing that children could be hurt by lavished love; and Myra, afraid to mother him too much without paternal counterbalance, treated him almost like an adult from the start, avoiding most of the physical affirmations of affection and maintaining a cool, sweet gentleness toward him which Judith thought might be responsible for his occasional vague spells of loneliness. Almost from the start, too, he was brought up to call her, not Mamma, Mommy, Mother but by her name. "Myra, can I go out and play?" "Myra, did you hear about Mrs. Simpson's yellow cat?" Judith was Judith to him, and I was Harry. It always sounded strange to me, but somehow it seemed to echo that quiddity of hers regarding names, that strange formality with those of whom she was most genuinely fond. To all his friends, his relatives, his teachers, her son was always *Mark*. She called him by his first name invariably. I had always felt that her *Henry*, used to me, was an endearment, but when she called him *Markham*, irrationally it struck me almost as a deliberate disavowal, an alienation.

Yet nothing could have seemed more normal than his growing up. She was in no way possessive. She made no effort to sequester him. From his earliest teens, she urged him to hang around the ship

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chandlery after school, riding downtown on his bike, so — as she put it to me — he'd learn the business from the water up: and I, of course, connived at it, for he already was a capable and eager sailor, delighted with everything pertaining to the sea. And there were always other boys and girls around the house, and parties, and bashful junior dances, the usual fun and games of those days.

He graduated from Roosevelt Junior High and went to San Diego High School for a year. Then, for the final two, she sent him to the Harvard School, a military academy in Los Angeles run by the Episcopalian Church, perfectly proper and respectable, where she believed he could extend his circle of acquaintances in a more masculine environment.

He remained quite as close to us as he had been. His letters reached me regularly, as mine reached him. On his vacations we simply took up once again where we'd left off. The Great Depression was now nearing its artificial end; the breath of coming war was in the wind. After the military school, he registered at San Diego State; he planned to be a naval architect. And then Pearl Harbor smashed our little world. He was eighteen, and he enlisted in the Coast Guard. Three months later, he was in the Aleutians; three years later, he was an officer, with a great deal of sea experience and the Navy Cross for an encounter with a surfaced submarine. I, of course, had been called to active duty, and the Navy had filed me away where it usually puts legal officers, behind a desk, where I was stuck for the duration, mostly within driving distance of my home, but with assignments at Bremerton and Newport News and Washington, D.C. We saw Mark several times, on leave, and met the girls he happened to be going with. He had matured, of course; he was a man now, not a boy. But he was still the same, quiet and courteous, decisive, self-possessed. Like Myra, he never really changed. When continents and oceans lay between us, he wrote as often as he could; and usually, when we were away, we'd hear from Myra too.

The war made very little difference to her life, for the Herries house kept it shut out effectively. When she was not in the garden, she lived within its graceful, gracious rooms. She had her friends, her music, and her books. The Japanese was gone, his place taken by a superannuated Scot who, I think, irritated her because he lacked the Oriental touch to which she'd been so long accustomed. She never seemed to worry about Mark. In one way only did she acknowledge that there was a war: two or three times a week,

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she served as a Gray Lady at the Naval Hospital, as gently and politely as she did everything, but with detachment, as though it was an unreality in which, out of courtesy, she temporarily pretended to believe.

Then suddenly it ended. Nagasaki followed Hiroshima, and the surrender none of us had ever quite believed in followed inevitably. As startlingly as war had torn us from our peaceful lives, peace dropped us into them again. Six months later, Mark came home once more.

He had written me from Puget Sound, where he had found a ketch. She was a fifty-footer, beautifully built by Lawley and very old, with many a sea-mile behind her, but she had been perfectly maintained. Would I, he asked, like to come north and help him bring her down? Of course, I went; and he and I and a young regular commander, a wartime friend of his, sailed her down the coast, stopping at almost every port to go ashore and eat good food, and drink, and watch the girls. It was a glorious trip, for March — doubly so because they made me conscious of how wonderful it was to sail and not have constantly to watch the skies for planes, the sea for periscopes. The ketch was named *My Louise* — after whose lady, once loved, now long forgotten? She was dry and comfortable and very happy; it seemed to me that she sang constantly.

So we returned to San Diego, and Judith met us with the car and drove us home. It was a day of white clouds and sunshine, and the first thing we saw as we rolled up was Myra in the garden, wearing her straw hat and gardening gloves, with an old Japanese — surely the same one? — beside her. She flowed toward us, smiling, and came to Mark and kissed him very lightly on the cheek and said, "You're home again," as though it were a fact of which he was unsure, a simple statement of her pleasure and his welcome.

For Mark was home, and everything was as it had been. His room was waiting for him. It was where he belonged. And for ten years, it was where he stayed. At first, he dutifully returned to college, but he had grown beyond it. He told me he no longer wanted to design yachts; he was content with those that other men had drawn and built and launched, like *My Louise*, and with the part his business played in keeping them afloat and shipshape. He moved into the firm, not trying to take over because Carmichael, his manager, was too good a man, but doing all he could to help and his best to learn. We still went fishing. We sailed up and down the coast in *My Louise*. There were, of course, new

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topics in his conversation; he talked of war and peace, of Arctic ice packs, and of how the Hongkong boatyards had skyrocketed their prices since the war; he talked of books I didn't know he'd read, of ports I didn't know he'd visited. More frequently than not, I learned from him.

He did not marry. Oh, there were women in his life. There was an ill-advised affair with a woman six years his senior, who, rather messily, turned out not to have been divorced at all. Once, there was even an announced engagement. But nothing came of any of it. He and a girl would draw together; for a while, deceptively, they'd radiate their pleasure in each other and promised happiness; then, invariably, they'd drift apart. When Judith questioned him, he told her seriously that he just didn't understand; perhaps he simply hadn't met the right girl yet.

During all that time, Myra scarcely aged — or so, at least, it seemed. Of course, face-to-face with her, I could see that, like all of us, she showed the passage of the years, but they'd passed gently for her, touching her hair with their fingertips, her features only with their very softest plumes. In the bright mornings, moving against her pastel background of hydrangeas, she was the same girl still.

Ten years — and then she died. She was ill three months only, and then she was dead, of cancer, that woman's enemy and hungry surgeon's friend. There had, it seemed, been a regrettable misdiagnosis, and nothing really helpful could be done. She took it calmly, refusing the painful and expensive futilities they offered her. Calmly and decorously, she lived out her life, continuing in the garden as long as possible, watching her Japanese at his work. But now, when people came to see her, she always took them slowly through the house, as if she herself felt compelled to drink it in; and Mark told me that sometimes at night he would come upon her all alone in the center of a room, just standing there while the tears coursed silently.

At the last, she refused a hospital, and — she could afford their house calls and nurses round the clock, and Mark made it very clear that she was not to be harassed — her doctors went along with it. She died on a sunny afternoon, in the bedroom she had shared with Cabell years ago. Judith had come to sit with her only an hour before, trying to conceal her own tearing pain at the sight of what, in so short a time, the disease had done, bursting the floodgates of those dammed-up years which only yesterday had seemed to touch so lightly. Judith had come to sit

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with her, and Myra raised herself, and clung to her, and cried, "Oh, Judith! I can't leave my house! I can't, *I can't!*"

And Judith tried to soothe her, telling her that of course she'd stay right there and nobody was going to take her to the hospital.

Then Myra let her head fall back again and smiled her old, gentle smile and said softly, "Judith, you know I don't mean *that.*"

And not long afterwards, she called out, *"Markahm? Where are you, Markham?"* and died.

As I have perhaps indicated, Mark was not naturally a violent man, but the day after the funeral he went downtown, strode into the office of the specialist who had blundered — and whose bill, marked with a *PLEASE REMIT,* had come that morning — jerked him to his feet, and hit him twice. Then he picked him up and hit him twice again. He left him with a broken jaw and several fewer teeth than he'd had previously. He phoned me to tell me what he'd done, and late that day he put to sea in *My Louise,* taking only an ancient Portuguese sailor named da Sousa, who worked for him.

He stayed offshore about a week, fishing, he told me later, and thinking matters out, coming to some sort of terms with the world and God and with himself. In the meantime, I had my innings with the doctor, who had of course preferred all sorts of charges. Before I talked with his attorney, I checked with friends of mine in the profession and learned that, once highly competent, he had become long on bedside manner and short on dedication and that his insurance company already had been forced to settle out of court in a malpractice suit. I pointed out that Mark had the resources and determination to refuse a settlement and to force such a suit to trial and that I, for my part, would do my best to make sure it received maximum publicity. Before he left my office the attorney had come round to my way of thinking, and Mark, when he sailed into port again, found that the charges had all been withdrawn.

Judith and I were much concerned about him during those weeks, for we could see him suffering. We made a point of having him to dinner, or going out with him, as frequently as possible. Therefore we were taken completely by surprise when, three months after Myra's death, he married.

He met the girl in Santa Barbara on a cruise. I couldn't take the time off, and he had taken Carmichael and da Sousa with him. He met her in a restaurant down on

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the wharf, having dinner with her aunt. Someone introduced them, and apparently they both fell instantly in love — at least the force that drew them to each other was irresistible. Two days later, she sailed down to San Diego with him, and he took her directly out to us — it was a Saturday — phoning first to make certain we'd be home.

Her name was Barbara Farrell, and she was as different from Myra Daunton as she could be. She was petite, with one of those precisely rounded little figures which always make one think of Paris first, and then of bed. Where Myra had seemed always to move slowly, she was quick and kittenish, full of pounce and bounce and gaiety, and very physical in her affection. She couldn't seem to keep her hands off Mark; almost literally, she was all over him.

He introduced her, and both of them stood there before us, glowing in their newly opened happiness. "This is Barb," he said. "We're getting married!"

Of course, there was much more, about her and her family, and what they planned to do, and about how long he'd known us. But all that was unimportant. The sole importance was their awareness of each other.

They were married a few days later in the Herries house, by an Episcopalian priest young enough not to condemn their haste. Her widowed father came down from Santa Barbara with her aunt and a carbon-copy younger sister. Judith and I were there, and Carmichael, and a few sailing friends. The garden had provided multitudes of flowers, and I was Mark's best man. Judith and I went home afterwards wondering what this new life would bring to the old house and whether Barb, with her exuberant vitality, would change it.

They went to San Francisco for their honeymoon, staying at the St. Francis, and returned happier than ever, Barb full of plans for freshening up the house: Not *that* picture there! A little lighter paper in the dining room? What if we had French doors cut through into the—? That sort of thing. But the happy weeks, the joyous months went by, and somehow nothing ever came of it.

Six months had passed before we even noticed that the Herries house seemed to be having its effect on Barbara. She now seemed muted, as though her vibrancy had failed even to ripple its long-settled calm. She seemed to move more slowly, perhaps more gracefully. No longer did she even speak of altering anything. "It's almost as though she's being absorbed into it," Judith said to me once. "I don't like it. She's much too young for anything like that." For a while she

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wondered whether perhaps Barb was pregnant.

Three or four months went by, and both of us became more seriously concerned. Barbara was making no attempt to change the house, but it seemed to us that definitely the house was changing her. When I first saw her in the garden, wearing a wide straw hat and gardening gloves, with the old Japanese at her elbow, for a moment I thought I'd seen a ghost. And her manner was very slowly, very subtly, altering. It had become more formal. One still could feel the radiance of her happiness, but it was of a different order now. She was no longer her effervescent self.

Judith and I discussed it, trying to lull each other's deep concern; we told ourselves that women often changed with marriage, that long-lived-in, well-loved houses developed their own personalities, and that even if the Herries house was changing her, it and its memories would never do her harm. Not for a year did we learn that Mark too had been worrying, increasingly. He brought the subject up while we were sailing. Did I believe, he asked, that *any* house could really have a profound influence on its inhabitants?

"Is that an abstract question, Mark?" I asked. "Or are you talking about Barbara?"

"You've noticed too?" he said. "It's doing something to her, Harry — and it's not healthy."

We both spoke only in generalities that day, and I'm afraid I offered him only a lot of platitudes I myself couldn't quite believe. But afterwards he began referring to it more and more frequently, with ever-growing concern, and more specifically. It was getting harder to get Barb to leave the house, even for a day or two. Or Barb no longer wanted to bother about the boat and sailed with him rarely and grudgingly. Or Barb had found some books of Myra's that he'd stored away, and tidily replaced them on their shelves. Or he had tried to talk it over with her, and she'd pooh-poohed the whole idea. Of course she loved the house, because it was *his* house and she loved him, but *she'd* not changed — maybe she was just becoming a staid old married woman, that was all. And she had laughed and hugged him close and kissed him.

And none of it was satisfactory. None of it could allay his apprehension for her. And I was not much help. What *can* one say in such a situation — suggest psychiatrists, psychologists? Or hazard stupid guesses about perhaps she'd tire of it, perhaps the pendulum would then swing back? He loved her then as much as he ever had, but now there was an undertone almost of desperation in

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his love, a yearning emptiness which previously their mutual love had filled.

The autumn came and went, and winter struck, surly and threatening, with that peculiar California cold which, unimpressive on thermometers, still chills you to the bone on evil days. From the sea it brought us the worst storms in years. Day after day gale warnings were posted up and down the coast. Day after day the fishing fleets stayed in. Day after day waves of unprecedented height dealt violently with ship and shore, driving the Coast Guard crazy, undermining houses built trustingly too near the sea. Cold, dull-copper clouds hung over us, and bitter, drenching rains came, threatening not to end.

These should not be the times when men are forced to face the cataclysms of their private lives, but too, too often — as if the elements themselves are part of the conspiracy — they are. It was on the afternoon of such a day that Mark came to me. He came without announcement, which was unusual in itself, but my secretary's voice, even before I saw him, warned me that something very terrible to him had occurred. I looked at him. He had shaved imperfectly, as though not quite aware of what he had been doing, and clearly he'd been drinking. I do not mean that he had had a drink or two; he had the haggard look men get when, unsuccessfully, they've turned to alcohol to kill their pain. My secretary closed the door behind him, and he sat down.

He said no word. His hands wrestled with each other in his lap.

"What's happened, Mark?" I walked round to his chair. "What's happened? Is it Barbara?"

Then it poured out of him. He almost screamed it out. "We — we thought it was the house — that *it* was changing her. It *wasn't*, Harry. It wasn't that at all!" He struck his forehead with his hands; he drew them down his face. "It — it *never* was! *Harry, it's been Myra!*"

"Myra?" I grabbed his shoulder and shook him very gently, as I sometimes had when he was just a kid. "Mark, Myra's *dead.*"

He looked me in the face. He shook his head. "Yes, Harry. She's dead. But all the same she's there. She's been there right along. And Barb — she's so open and so friendly and so warm — Oh, my God! Harry, can't you *see? My mother's taken Barbara over!*"

Never before had I heard him refer to Myra as his mother — and the word left his mouth as though fishhooks held it there.

"I'm going to pour us both a drink," I told him, getting the office bourbon and the glasses. "I

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won't ask you if you're serious, because I know you are. But do you really *mean* it? Mark, do you mean to tell me Barbara is *possessed?* Even if such a thing is possible — and I don't think this is the century for it — I can't imagine Myra *doing* a thing like that!"

"*I* can," said Mark, his voice suddenly dull and dead.

"But why, Mark? *Why?*"

"She's done it very gently," he went on, "as she did everything. Barb seems quite happy. She doesn't even know that *she* is there. Harry, would you believe that Barb, my *wife,* no longer calls me Mark — that now I'm Markham to her? *Markham,* Harry. Would you believe that a few weeks ago she began trying to move us into Myra's bedroom from my own? Yes, I've been worried a long time, and wondering — and now I'll tell you *why* she's doing it, and how I know." He picked his drink up, put it down untasted. "While I still thought it was the house, I tried to think up ways to jar Barb loose from it. Finally, a day or two ago, I sent her roses, the kind she'd carried on our wedding day, and proposed a sort of little second honeymoon. I'd reserved a bridal suite at the old Hotel del Coronado, which Barb loved. She went there with me, and I had dinner served upstairs, just to the two of us, and courted her as though we'd never dared to touch each other in our lives. And everything went beautifully. Finally, we went to bed, and we made love."

He sobbed, once. He picked his drink up and put it down again. "Barb — Barb and I —" he said, letting his voice die almost to a whisper. "We always simply lost ourselves in one another — do you understand? She was all spontaneity — until last night. Last night, I looked at her just when — just when her whole being *should have been with me* — and, Harry, she was *not.* It — It was as though a part of her was not involved at all, as if it was just watching there, amused —"

He looked up then. He looked up as my mind thrust upon me, perfect in its every intimate detail, that amused detachment with which, so many years ago, Myra had watched me in the act of love. I felt the ice of fear — for this was something he could not have known. He saw it in my face and read it instantly. He saw my recognition and my certainty, and if he had cherished any lingering doubt, that doubt was killed. He looked at me and smiled with a sweet, tragic bitterness. "You loved her, didn't you?" he said.

And I could only nod.

He drank his drink now, slowly, not compulsively. "It's really pretty simple, Harry, if you know

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anything about psychiatry. Do you remember how I always had to call Myra by her name? Do you remember how she almost never touched me when I was a kid. Or how she'd introduce me — always as Markham, never as 'my son?' Of course you do. Well, *that* is why she's here. That's why she's stealing Barb's life away. Perhaps where she is now mother-and-son taboos don't count. Anyway, she's much stronger, Harry. She's dominant. I — I recognized that instantly."

It was as though the cold clouds overhead had wrapped themselves around my heart, and clumsily my heart went out to him. *"Mark!* Oh, Mark, that's terrible! Good God, that would —"

I'd been about to say, in words I can't recall, that the experience could shatter any man and any marriage bed. I choked it off abruptly, but he had already fathomed what was in my mind.

"That wasn't it," he whispered. "That wasn't it at all!"

He stopped, and I could see the primal horror of his eyes.

"You think it turned me off?" he cried. "Harry, oh God *Harry — it turned me on!*"

He dropped his face down to his cupped hands and sobbed without a sound. I can't remember what we really said while he remained there; my mind, confronted by something cruelly unbelievable, which I had no alternative but to believe, has drowned the details. I know he wept. I suppose he blurted out his terror, his horror at himself, his fears for Barbara's health and sanity. He knew no way, no way at all, to set her free. He asked me for my help — and I had none to give. I was as lost — if not as desperately, at least as utterly — as he himself. I must have done what lawyers usually do under such circumstances. I temporized. I urged him to seek sage advice, professional help, to wait so that I could think about it, to wait just until later in the day, to phone up Barb and tell her he and I were having dinner out —

I can remember how he listened to me. I can remember how he finally rose and shook my hand and thanked me. "Harry, I know you're doing everything you can. I'll think about it. What else can I do?"

He left me shaken to the core. I sat there for two hours, drinking my own bourbon, stupidly beating out my brains against a dead end of impossibilities.

After the two hours, Carmichael phoned me.

"Harry?" His voice was anxious and abrupt. "What the hell you doing in your office?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I was hoping you'd gone out with Mark. Da Sousa didn't, so I was hoping maybe you —"

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"Gone out?" I shouted at him. "You mean in *My Louise?"*

"That's right!" he shouted back, almost hysterically. "An hour ago. I've checked with everyone. The stupid bastard must've gone alone. Harry, he can't work her single-handed — you know that! — she's not rigged for it, not in this weather. Christ, the barometer's *still* dropping! Even the goddamn Navy's run for cover!"

"I'll be right down," I said, and I drove down to the foot of Broadway in the chilling rain, and the two of us stood there and stared out at the rough, wind-torn bay, and cursed at it because it was a limb of the destroying sea, and Carmichael wondered what the hell had gotten into Mark, and I could sense the fear within him, but told him nothing.

That night I forced myself to tell it all to Judith, the whole story, going over every detail I could remember, and I let her comfort me for my futility and reassure me because she too, after her initial shock and agony, believed. There was only one thing she insisted on: that no unnatural lust for her own son had drawn Myra back; it simply couldn't be. We finally went to bed hoping that Mark would sail home safe and sound — and knowing in ourselves that he would not.

Next morning in the mail, I got a note from him.

Dear Harry, he had written,

Barb has a right to lead her life, and there's only one way I can help her, isn't there? I can't fight Myra, So —

When you can't whip 'em, join 'em.

My love to you, old friend.

Later, we heard that a Coast Guard cutter had spoken to him

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near daybreak far to the northwest of the Coronado Islands, had warned him he was carrying too much sail, had pleaded with him to escort him in, and had been told bluntly to go about her business. A week later, wreckage had been definitely identified, and there was then no question of his fate.

Barbara remained secluded in the Herries house. Her father and her sister came down to be with her, and Judith, though she tried, found there was little she could do.

Almost two weeks went by before, very suddenly, I saw that Judith's intuition about Myra had been right. The storms had ended, the skies were blue, and the sun shone again. Leaving my front door, I saw that Barbara once more was in the garden, in her wide hat and gardening gloves, attended by the ancient Japanese.

I called good morning to her, and she turned. She smiled at me, a sad and tender smile, with just a hint behind it of disassociation from mundane reality.

"Good morning, Henry," she called pleasantly. "It's *such* a lovely day!"

Then I knew that Myra had never lusted for her son, that he alone had been torn by that desire, that all his sacrifice had been in vain, and that her one all-consuming passion had been, as it still was, for her embracing house.

I knew it, and I shuddered, and I shudder still when I remember it — and when I wonder what has become of him, of Markham.

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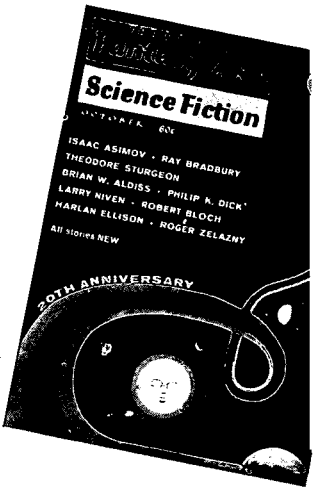

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